

10-STORY ALL DIFFERENT! DETECTIVE

MAGAZINE
JULY

LOOT OF THE LAUGHING GHOUL

Great Detective Action Novel
By RALPH POWERS

10¢



HOARDER OF DEATH

By CLIFF HOWE

*And 8 Other Complete
Detective Stories*

Sawyers

Life's Most Embarrassing Moment



WHEN THE GIRL
YOU WERE KEEN
ABOUT SAW YOU
IN A BATHING
SUIT AND YELLED—

"HELLO,
SKINNY!"

I'LL PROVE IN 7 DAYS THAT I CAN MAKE YOU A NEW MAN!

YES—right in these first 7 days I'll start to **PROVE** I can turn **YOU** into a man of might and muscle. And it will be **PROOF** that you (and anyone else) can **SEE, FEEL, MEASURE** with a tape!

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I'LL SEND YOU
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I have no use for pills, freak diets, or apparatus that might strain your heart or other vital organs. **DYNAMIC TENSION** is the *natural* way to build up your body, strengthen you inside and out. It not only makes you an "Atlas Champion," but goes after constipation, pimples, skin blemishes, and other weaknesses. And it starts ridding you of them at once.

Actual Photographs Will Show You

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● "I WAS STUCK. A wife and three kiddies — and the same old pay envelope. I couldn't see a thing ahead except the same old grind. Then one day I read an I. C. S. ad. The coupon fascinated me. A new idea struck me — it was a light in a wilderness of darkness to me! Today, because I mailed that coupon two years ago, I am a trained man — making a trained man's pay!"

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10-Story DETECTIVE

Vol. 1

JULY, 1938

No. 3

- ★ **LOOT OF THE LAUGHING GHOUL**
(Detective-Action Novel) **Ralph Powers 10**
Paul Hammond, daring undercover agent, didn't know whether a golden-haired beauty might be his own ally—or the most dangerous girl in the world.
- ★ **HOARDER OF DEATH** **Cliff Howe 37**
A swivel-chair sleuth had to be a decoy for a corpse collector.
- ★ **THE GREEN HEART MYSTERY** **Carl Rathjen 47**
Could Bluff McCarty bluff his way out of a jam he bluffed his way into?
- ★ **FINGER OF DOOM** **Rex Grahame 58**
His time limit threatened to break Detective Phillips—and his vow of vengeance.
- ★ **RETURN FROM HELL** **Arthur Flint 64**
Jim Gardner had to be buried alive to untangle a terror trap.
- ★ **SEAMSTRESS TO SATAN** **Eric Lennox 75**
One skein of blood can wind a long noose.
- ★ **MURDER ICE** **S. J. Bailey 77**
Melting ice blazed a hot route to the electric chair.
- ★ **CELLULOID NOOSE** **R. B. S. Davis 85**
That fallen idol forced Mac into the role of Lucifer's stand-in.
- ★ **SHARPSHOOTER—WITHOUT BULLETS** . . . **Paul Adams 95**
The very beasts he had shot put a big-game hunter in a web of savage hate.
- ★ **DEAD MAN'S MARTYRDOM** **Leon Dupont 104**
A dead man is a poor prospect as a murder victim.

Cover by Norman Saunders

This is an Ace Magazine—See Page 8

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OPPORTUNITIES
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YOU NEED
PULL TO GET
A GOOD JOB
THESE DAYS



GETTING
AHEAD NOW
IS MIGHTY
TOUGH



THERE JUST
AREN'T ANY
GOOD JOBS
LEFT

YOUNG MEN
DON'T HAVE A
REAL CHANCE
FOR GOOD JOBS



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Let me prove I can train you at
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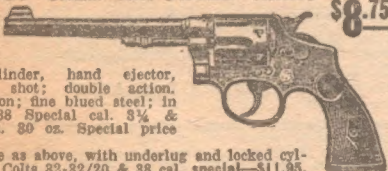
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28x3.50-19	2.45	1.15
28x3.50-18	2.45	1.15
28x3.50-17	2.45	1.15
30x3.50-19	2.45	1.15
30x3.50-18	2.45	1.15
30x3.50-17	2.45	1.15
30x3.50-16	2.45	1.15
30x3.50-15	2.45	1.15
30x3.50-14	2.45	1.15
30x3.50-13	2.45	1.15
30x3.50-12	2.45	1.15
30x3.50-11	2.45	1.15
30x3.50-10	2.45	1.15
30x3.50-9	2.45	1.15
30x3.50-8	2.45	1.15
30x3.50-7	2.45	1.15
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Enjoy **BEAUTIFUL NATURAL-LOOKING FALSE TEETH** **LOW PRICES** **60 DAYS' TRIAL**

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CHAPTER I

THE BLACK CIRCLE

A BLACK-ROBED figure whose features were masked by a cowl of the same obliterating shade, faced a ring of upturned eyes. Only the eyes were visible, eager eyes and sharp, flashing with excitement. They peered through slits in masks that covered the faces, following each word and gesture.

"This may seem theatrical to some

of you," the voice of the black-robed figure was saying. "It may appear rather juvenile to others, but I can assure you that such is not the case. This is very serious-business, and there is a reason for these masks. They are for your mutual protection. In spite of all the care we have used, somewhere there is a traitor. Who? I cannot tell. But for the protection of the rest of you, he must not see your face nor guess your identity. Your calling is sufficiently hazardous

without the added danger of treachery."

Paul Hammond glanced from left to right, gauging the strange assembly of which he was a member. He wondered if the chief actually knew of a traitor's presence or was speaking from experience.

Outside, metropolitan New York roared, but the meeting was held in a darkened, sound-proof room, where blue lights made clear sight doubly difficult. No one spoke except the central figure, so that no voices could be recognized and identified. Hammond and his companions had been assembled in such a manner that no one saw his neighbor until he was masked and robed. They would disband in the same manner, the chief had told them earlier. Half a dozen in number, they were the élite of America's undercover agents.

"I am not suggesting," the voice of the cowed speaker went on, "that any of you is a traitor—yet. But we must face facts. Even in as small and as well-selected a group as this, there is liable to be one weakling who will succumb to temptation. It is for the protection of the others, as I have already said, that these precautions are taken.

"There are many others which you must take for yourselves. Under no circumstances admit to anyone your identity as a member of this group, no matter what evidence is presented. Such an admission would be disastrous, yet you will face such a test within a short time. Communicate only with me, using the codes with which you have been provided. Messages to the department should be signed with your letter and number. If you want the despatch to be read by me alone, reverse the signature, using the numeral last, and it will be brought to me before being decoded."

ONCE more Paul Hammond looked around. His eyes traveled from one robed figure to another. He won-

dered if any of the group were women. There were only five besides himself and the chief. His gaze centered on a slight figure seated just in front of him. Those slender shoulders could not be a man's. Then he caught a glimpse of tawny hair. A curl had fallen below the edge of her hood. It was an unusual color, that almost leonine shade. Hammond straightened in his chair. That tawny curl stirred a vision in Hammond's mind, a picture of hazel eyes, flecked with gold, and a laughing mouth. Where had he seen that mass of curls and smiling, gold-flecked eyes?

Words from the chief cut through Hammond's musings.

"This much we know." The speaker's voice sank to a whisper. "The blow will fall somewhere in California. The information obtained thus far is fragmentary. We have reason to believe that the cleverest group of criminals ever assembled is converging on the West Coast.

"The police and the Department of Justice have failed to find any tangible clues, and have asked our assistance. We are a new corps, a corps élite, and this request is a challenge. You may call on either organization for aid, but make no explanations, and do not hint that you belong to this organization. Use them at will, but give no confidences. This is our first major effort. Let's make it one that will not only protect our country, but win a victory that will put D-1 in the van of America's undercover armies."

The blue lights dimmed as the speaker finished. Then a voice sounded through the darkness.

"You will leave by exits according to letters," the voice instructed. "Automatic elevators will be waiting to conduct you to the floors which were designated for your arrival and departure. Please use them as soon as you have left your gowns and masks in the anteroom. Letters A to G will be the first to leave. You may go now."

Shaded lights winked on, marking the various exits. Paul Hammond gazed at the masked girl in front of him. She did not move. He arose regretfully and passed through a door marked with the letter "C." Removing his mask and gown, he placed them in a steel locker and stepped into an automatic elevator. Following his instructions, he alighted on the second floor and mingled with the throng of civil service employees. A few minutes later, he was on the street.

He did not loiter, for he knew that other agents of the masked chief would be following his movements until he was well out of New York. The department took no chances, even with its own personnel.

He hurried to his hotel and inspected his trunks. They were packed and ready for a lengthy journey, but he went through them once more to be sure of everything. None of his linen bore a laundry mark. His tailors' labels had been removed from his clothing. His brushes, watch and cigarette case were innocent of initials. If he was killed, there would be no means of identifying him.

MIDDAY saw Paul Hammond board a train for San Francisco. His final instructions had been committed to memory before he left the department building and the paper containing them burned in the presence of the chief. He had been given the names of the police and Department of Justice agents upon whom he could call, and had learned that the D-1 group would have only one other operative in San Francisco. The others would be sent to other California cities which might be the objective of attack.

Hammond leaned back in his seat and lighted a cigarette. Then he glanced over the early editions of the afternoon newspapers with which he had provided himself. A short paragraph on the inside of the second section attracted his attention. It announced the coming arrival of Señor

Rafael Pombal, who was expected to land in San Francisco the following Saturday afternoon.

It was only a paragraph, yet it set his blood to tingling. Señor Pombal was a fabulously wealthy South American whose source of income was veiled in mystery.

If Paul Hammond was to have Señor Pombal for his adversary, he would be meeting the man who was suspected of being the criminal genius of the continent.

The sound of grating metal broke in on Hammond's thoughts, and his head turned suddenly. The door to his compartment was being opened slowly, furtively.

He caught a glimpse of a hand, long and powerfully fingered. But it was the hairiness of the hand which held his attention. Then a face appeared, a bearded face, the eyes partly screened by lightly tinted glasses.

"How do you do?" the young man greeted his uninvited visitor.

The door was thrown completely open. The newcomer was tall and powerful, his clothing of stylish cut. The black beard was carefully trimmed, but it was like a mask, screening the expressive lines of his face. Only the dark, shadowed eyes gave key to this strange personality.

"I beg your pardon. I must have made a mistake. This is evidently not—" he paused to consult a small ticket taken from his vest pocket—"not Number Seven."

"No, this is Eight. Your place is next door."

"I'm very sorry. I've been in the observation car ever since we left and—please pardon me."

"Of course. Most natural thing in the world," said Hammond.

"That's very kind of you. Thanks again. Good day."

"Good day."

THE door closed and the stranger was gone. A tight-lipped smile thinned Hammond's strong mouth. He had told the visitor that the mis-

take was the most natural thing in the world, yet he knew that the furtive opening of the door had not been through error. It told Hammond that his enemies were already seeking to make contact with him. He must find out who they were and what their mission was.

His first move was to prepare his room for the search he knew it would be given. He opened his brief case. It was filled with papers and letters concerning shipments of California wines to New York and Philadelphia.

With the papers ready for his adversaries to examine, Paul Hammond lighted another cigarette. He gazed into the blue smoke that floated upward, trying to recall the bearded face that had been thrust into his room. But the features eluded him. Even the shadowed eyes behind the tinted glasses were unfamiliar. Yet those hairy hands had stirred a vibrant chord in his memory. He had seen hands like that before. Where? He could not remember. The hair reached the last joint of the fingers, forming a small dark patch just back of the nail. Few hands were like that.

He summoned the Pullman conductor and showed him a railroad detective's badge. He always carried one for just such inquiries. He asked the name of the man occupying Number Eight.

"It was booked in the name of Mr. Max Ulrich, sir," the conductor informed him.

"Ulrich?" Hammond repeated the name. It meant nothing to him.

Outside he heard the call of the dining-car steward announcing that dinner was being served. Hammond's mind was still filled with thoughts of his bearded visitor when he reached the dining-car. It was nearly filled.

"This way, sir," an official said.

He followed the man automatically. A chair was pulled back and he was seated. He picked up the menu and studied it. Then he looked up to see hazel eyes, flecked with tiny particles of gold, gazing into his. He

stared at a halo of tawny hair that framed a beautiful face. Curls long enough to have fallen below an obliterating mask clung to her neck.

There was something breath-taking about this girl, something that recalled moonlight in Miami, when Hammond had been special agent for a state prosecutor.

He looked at her over his menu card, speculatively. He wanted to say, "Haven't we met somewhere, dined and danced?" But he thrust the thought aside. It was too old an opening.

The girl looked up at this moment.

"It isn't like the Flower Limited, is it?" Hammond asked.

"The Flower Limited?" A puzzled look came into the gold-flecked eyes.

"Yes, the one for Miami."

She smiled and shook her head. "You must be mistaken," she said. "I have never been to Miami on the Flower Limited."

Paul Hammond grinned. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "Please pardon me."

"Of course. It's the most natural thing in the world."

The young man's glance hardened. Those were the very words he had said, not half an hour ago, to the bearded man who had entered his compartment so furtively. He wondered if she had heard those words and was cleverly prodding him. Perhaps she was an accomplice of the mysterious Max Ulrich. Yet that couldn't be. He had seen those tawny curls in the blue-lighted secret chamber of D-1. Still, Ulrich might have been one of the masked, black-robed figures. But it didn't make sense, unless the chief was setting one operative to watch another.

"I'd better watch my step," Hammond thought, and said aloud, "It's awfully decent of you to—"

"Telegram for Miss Nason! Telegram for—"

The girl glanced up and raised her hand. In another moment, the Pull-

man porter was delivering a message to her. Paul Hammond took a quick breath. Nevel Nason! He had heard her praises sung by some of the best agents in government circles. He had always pictured her as a woman of mature years, but this was only a girl.

"Pittsburgh!" the brakeman called.

He heard a murmured word of apology as his companion arose and walked rapidly down the aisle, the telegram in her hand.

HAMMOND kept his seat. He was puzzled. Nevel Nason would not be so foolish as to use her own name in having telegrams addressed to her. It was like flying a flag. The name was known wherever government agents gather.

He pushed back his chair and started back for his own car. The train was still motionless. As he neared the door, he saw a woman bolt from a compartment farther down the passageway. Then a shout rang through the car. Passengers appeared, staring in every direction. The girl of the dining-car reappeared with the Pullman conductor, and pointed into her room. Her face was pale, but strangely calm. She glanced at him and raised one hand to push back her hair.

Was that a signal? Hammond hurried forward. The girl and the conductor were staring into the room again, and Hammond looked over their shoulders. Upon the floor was the body of a woman, a dagger in her breast.

The conductor turned and barked a command to the ashen-faced porter, who dashed out and returned immediately with several uniformed police.

Passengers were ordered to their compartments, but once more Paul Hammond flashed his railroad detective badge and was allowed to remain. The sergeant in charge made a quick examination of the body.

"Less than fifteen minutes," he said, getting to his feet. "Who found her?"

"I did," said Nevel Nason in a quiet voice.

"Any idea who did it?"

"Why, no. I—"

"It couldn't have been Miss Nason," Paul Hammond broke in. "She and I had dinner together."

"I'm not charging her with anything," the sergeant snapped, "but she'll have to testify before the coroner. Get your bags, miss."

"But, sergeant—" Hammond protested.

"You'll be lucky if we don't make you stop over," the policeman said. "Here, Cassidy, get this fellow's name and address and where we can reach him. Get the names of any other passengers who know anything about it. Find out—"

Paul Hammond did not hear the rest of the sergeant's instructions. He was gazing at the head of the dead woman. It was covered with golden curls. They were not the tawny shade of Miss Nason's, yet the murderer might have taken the girl for Nevel.

"Who is she?" he asked Nevel in a low tone.

"My maid, Ethel. She looks something like me, and—" She stopped and her eyes hardened. Paul Hammond looked around. The tall, bearded stranger who had tried to enter his compartment was coming down the corridor.

The young man's glance returned to the girl's eyes. They had narrowed, and a cold light had replaced the golden flecks that warmed the hazel background. Max Ulrich paused at his own compartment. His bearded jaw dropped when he saw Nevel Nason standing in the aisle. Although the tinted glasses half-screened his eyes, Hammond saw them widen with surprise. For a moment, bearded man and tawny-haired girl stared at each other. Then Max Ulrich

slipped through his compartment door, and the catch clicked behind him.

A sergeant of police took Nevel Nason's arm and started for the platform. "I'm sorry, miss," he said, "but you'll have to make a statement to the district attorney and perhaps appear at the inquest."

Paul Hammond stared at Nevel Nason's departing form. But was she Nevel? An aura of mystery surrounded her. Death had come to her stateroom, yet she had remained cool, self-poised.

Then through his mind flashed a story he had heard of another woman, even more daring than Nevel Nason. Her name was Bette Langwell, and she was known to the police of the entire continent as the most dangerous woman in the world. Bette Langwell was a phantom woman who boasted that no one had ever seen her real face. She was known as a master at disguise. Could this be she?

CHAPTER II

THE MURDER WOMAN

FROM his stateroom window, Paul Hammond watched Nevel cross the platform with the sergeant of police. A line deepened between his brows as her figure melted into the crowd. He wondered if she really was Nevel Nason.

He stepped out into the corridor again, and saw a long, wicker basket being taken from the girl's compartment. It was the body of the murdered maid. Hammond's gray eyes were coldly serious. Not only had murder been done, but the crime was a part in the swiftly moving drama in which he had a rôle.

Who had killed the maid, and why? It was either an attempt on Nevel Nason's life or a trick to hold her in Pittsburgh. If she had been the intended victim, another attempt would be made. If it was a plan to hold her, the coup had been successful.

As the train resumed its journey, Hammond heard the other passengers discussing the crime. Many hinted that the girl was the murderer. He wandered into the observation car. There, too, the crime was the topic of gossip.

"I heard her tell the police sergeant that the dagger must have come through the open window when the train was standing." Max Ulrich was giving his views to a circle of women. "Personally, I know that did not happen."

"How do you know that?" Hammond asked, joining the ring.

"Because I was standing on the platform not five feet from her window," the man replied.

Hammond looked into the bearded face. It was unreadable. The shadowed eyes stared out through the tinted glasses and met his gaze.

"Then it must have been she," a woman exclaimed.

"Or Ulrich," Hammond said softly, his eyes still fixed on the bearded face.

A smile flashed through the heavy beard. "That is a reasonable deduction," the man retorted, "but I was under observation all the time. You'll have to find your guilty man elsewhere."

Morning found the train roaring through the Middle West. Paul Hammond was one of the earliest to arise. As he passed Max Ulrich's room, he looked in to see it empty of all luggage. The young man again flashed his railroad detective's badge and made inquiries.

"He's gone back to Pittsburgh," the Pullman conductor informed him. "He received a telegram asking him to testify at the coroner's inquest."

"Going to appear against Miss Nason?"

"No, he said he would testify in her behalf. He seemed quite anxious about it."

Hammond nodded. He could do nothing to help her, for his presence was demanded in San Francisco. Nev-

TSD

el Nason's case would have to wait. Besides, he did not even know she was Nevel Nason. She might be Bette Langwell.

Morning of his fourth day upon the transcontinental saw him disembark upon the Oakland Mole and board a ferry to cross the bay to San Francisco. One of the fogs for which the Golden Gate district is noted had swept over the harbor, blanketing everything in its brownish-gray folds. Whistles screamed their warnings as the ferry started for the San Francisco side. From right and left came the deep-throated bellow of foghorns. Ghostly ships appeared, and then faded into the enveloping curtain of clinging mist.

At last they reached the picturesque ferry building. Paul Hammond hurried to the baggage room to have his trunks forwarded to the Danvers Hotel. He had read in one of the San Francisco newspapers he had purchased on the train that Señor Pom-bal and a group of South American business men were stopping there.

He wormed his way through a crowd of transcontinental tourists, and had started for one of the windows when he saw a woman approach the same opening. He could not see her face, but the cluster of tawny curls that clung to her neck claimed his attention. Nevel Nason, here in San Francisco!

He edged in closer and heard her giving instructions for the handling of her trunks.

"Hotel Danvers? Yes, ma'am," the baggage master said.

Hammond touched her on the arm. "Hello," he said. "I didn't expect to find you here ahead of us."

The woman turned. For a moment, a puzzled expression came into her eyes. Then she smiled.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Hammond. Yes, I took a plane after that horrible affair in Pittsburgh, and beat you here."

"Did Mr. Ulrich come on, too?" he asked.

"Mr Ulrich?" she said uncertainly.

"I'm sure I don't know. He was very kind, however, in aiding me."

Hammond's eyes were fixed on the girl's face. Something had changed her. Her features seemed harder. Perhaps it was because the light was harsher than the candlelight of the railroad dining-car. Then, too, she had gone through a murder inquiry. Now even her features seemed different. They were familiar, yet strange.

He had seen her only a few minutes, face to face, but he felt a sudden whirling in a mind that was usually cool and analytical. Could she be the same girl, yet seem like a different person?

"So glad to have seen you again, Mr. Hammond." The girl turned to go. "I hope we'll run into each other again."

"That's good of you. I hope so, too."

Hammond forgot his own luggage for the time being. Waiting until Nevel Nason had mingled with the crowd, he followed her out onto the wide esplanade that marks the city side of the Ferry Building.

The heavy fog was rolling in from the bay, and the taxicabs which glided up to the curb seemed like ghostly vehicles. Street cars clanged and horns tooted, while the wraiths of men and women hurried in all directions.

"Here's your car, ma'am," a voice called to the girl.

"Thank you. Which is it? I can't see in this fog."

"This way, ma'am."

Paul Hammond hurried through the ghostly throng, and reached the girl just as she stepped into a long, black limousine. An arm was stretched out from the inside to aid her. Hammond caught a glimpse of a powerful hand, hairy and long-fingered, with dark tufts that extended almost to the nails.

Then the limousine door banged shut and the car glided into the fog, its horn sounding raucously.

THE long, black limousine slid through the fog, moving with ease up the steep hill leading to the Danvers Hotel. For several minutes neither the man nor the woman spoke. He was concentrating on a code cablegram which he held in his hand. The woman peered out into the mists, a smile on her red lips.

"I had a rather fortunate meeting in the luggage room," she said at last.

"Señor Pombal?"

"No. Paul Hammond."

The man hurriedly put his cablegrams away. "How did you work it?" he asked.

"I didn't. He did it for me. It was perfect. Of course I told him that I had come out by plane. And Dan—"

"Max, please, and you'd better make it Ulrich, just for practice, Nevel."

Her eyes flicked up to meet his, and paused to survey his face.

"You look much better shaved than with that horrible beard," she remarked.

The man shrugged, then went on. "You recognized his photograph and called him by name?" he asked.

She nodded. "I don't think Paul Hammond is quite the fool you say he is, my friend," she began. "I saw suspicion in his eyes."

"Did you try the letter-figure code on him?"

"Of course not. Am I an idiot? That's the most important thing we have, but I've got to be sure he'll answer. We don't know the reply, and I'll have to get him off guard to get it. That is one thing we must have."

"I'll leave that to you, Bet—"

"Nevel, please!" She glanced toward the driver.

"Don't be afraid of him," Max Ulrich replied. "That's Harolds. He leased that house you selected near the waterfront."

The woman nodded. For a while she peered out into the fog, her eyes dreamy. Then she faced the man again.

"Did you make arrangements to get on the staff at the Danvers?"

"Of course. Oscar, whom I knew in New Orleans, is headwaiter. He thinks I am a G-man watching Señor Pombal and his crowd."

"How about Miss X, my double in Pittsburgh?" she asked.

"I've told you, my dear, that everything has been arranged. She is being held *incommunicado* until this business is over. It cost a pretty penny."

"Such things always do. Well, so long, Danny. Please see that there are no chloral drops in my wine this evening."

Max Ulrich smiled. The car had stopped on the side of the hill just before it reached the top upon which stood the Danvers. The fog encompassed them. The ghost of a street car clanged by, but they gave it no heed.

The woman and man embraced. Then Max Ulrich turned and melted into the haze.

Nevel Nason took up the speaking tube.

"Give him time to reach the hotel first, Harolds," she ordered. "I wonder what kind of a waiter Dan Davids will make?"

"He does everything well, ma'am," the chauffeur answered in the friendliest of tones.

"Yes," the woman agreed.

Her eyes hardened just a little, but Harolds did not see the expression, nor note the tightening of the incarnadined lips.

ALTHOUGH the fog held San Francisco in its moist grip, slowing traffic to tortoise pace, Paul Hammond's mind was racing at top speed. He faced a problem that might have the most sinister of objectives. Murder had already raised its gory head. And now he was working with a puzzle that baffled him completely. It was linked to the murder in a manner he could not define—linked,

also, to the task which had brought him to San Francisco.

Arriving at the hotel, Paul Hammond found a sheaf of telegrams awaiting him. He knew they would be in code, and he did not open them until he was in his rooms. Then he set to work.

One message burned itself into Hammond's mind. It read:

"The Stone" one of phrases our agents picked up. May refer to Emir ruby now in Los Angeles. Agents are checking.

D-1.

"The Stone," Hammond repeated.

He then turned to the last message from his superior. It referred to a well-known live-wire newspaperman on a San Francisco daily.

"Make contact with Arthur Haycox," was the closing paragraph, "using either D. J. or Secret Service agents. Always pose as a member of their organizations."

The words, "The Stone," intrigued him. They could mean much or little.

He glanced out of the window. The heavy mists seemed to be pressing against the panes, demanding entrance. Crossing to the cheerful fire, he burned his chief's telegrams and his translations. After encoding a report on what he had already done, he turned to his trunks to inspect the compact radio sending and receiving sets that were integral parts of his luggage. On more than one occasion they had helped him solve problems that otherwise would have been beyond his skill. One device, particularly, was an invention only recently perfected by the secret operations department. It combined both radio and phonograph, its waxed cylinders recording both telegraphic communications and those of the spoken voice.

Hammond realized that he must use every trick in the D-1's bag if he was going to defeat the shadowy figures arrayed against him. If Señor Pombal was at the helm, the cleverest crooks in the Americas would be in

his employ, and Hammond's own life would be in constant danger. The ring had not hesitated to kill Nevel Nason's maid, even for a minor advantage, and he was in danger of being eliminated with the same ruthlessness.

With this danger in mind, Hammond put on a bullet-proof vest beneath his dress shirt and got out a special under-arm holster for his automatic. As he was dressing, his telephone rang. He picked up the instrument and said, "Hello."

"This is H-7 of D-1 speaking," a woman's voice began. "You will learn something interesting if you dance with me tonight."

Hammond stared incredulously at the telephone. "Just what will I learn?"

"I could scarcely tell you over the telephone."

"Not a hint?"

A tinkle of laughter sounded over the wire.

"As a hint—The Stone." There was a click, and the wire went dead.

Hammond stood motionless. Aid must be summoned. He could not do everything. He turned to his wireless apparatus and sent a call snapping through the air, a summons to the Department of Justice, and was soon in communication with the special agent in charge.

"Have you anyone who is acquainted with Miss Nevel Nason, now registered at the Danvers?" he inquired. "Orders were issued for an operative to get in contact with her."

"Colonel Ward, retired, has made contact," was the answer.

"Have him meet her just before dinner tonight," Hammond ordered.

Now to send messages to the Army, summoning an Intelligence officer, to be accompanied by a woman. An answer informed him that Major Carter would be present. Hammond lighted a cigarette and puffed reflectively. His foes were setting their stages. His, too, would be ready. And two army officers out for an evening of fun would smoke-screen

his operations. He screwed a Maxim silencer onto the nose of his thin-barreled gun.

There was a knock on the door, and he threw a white scarf over the weapon.

"Come in," he called.

A tall man, attired in the uniform of a waiter, appeared. He bowed as he closed the door.

"Our dining room is going to be a bit crowded tonight, sir." The man spoke with the precise accent of an English-trained servant. "The head-waiter would like to know if you care to be given a reservation."

Hammond glanced at the man. He was tall, smooth-shaven. His eyes looked hauntingly familiar, but his face was utterly strange.

"Why, yes, thanks. Please reserve a table for six."

"Six, sir? Very well, sir."

The man made a note upon a small tablet. Hammond's eyes narrowed as he saw his hands. They were powerful, long-fingered, and covered with hair that reached almost to the nails.

"I'll reserve your table, Mr. Hammond. Thank you, sir."

The man bowed and was gone.

Hammond stepped to the telephone and asked for the Danvers' head-waiter.

"What do you know about the waiter who came to my room a few minutes ago, the chap with the long, hairy fingers? Did he come to you with references of previous employment?"

Oscar smiled. "You mean Fred Wilkins? I have known him for not less than ten years, sir."

"And you vouch for him?" Hammond asked.

"Completely, sir. I have every reason to have the greatest of confidence in him, sir."

"All right. Sorry to have bothered you. Thank you very much."

Oscar bowed himself out. Hammond lit another cigarette. He was not entirely satisfied.

CHAPTER III

THE LAUGHING GHOUL

A FEW minutes later, Hammond was strolling through the Danvers' cocktail lounge, where women with flashing jewels puffed perfumed cigarettes and chatted with their escorts. He noticed a small group of South Americans approaching toward the bar. In their center was a short, squat man, with small, piggish eyes. Here was Señor Rafael Pombal.

When Señor Pombal and his party had disappeared into the bar, Paul Hammond drifted away. He had a task that demanded even closer attention than the South American. He strolled up and down the lounge until he saw Nevel Nason at the other end of the corridor. With her was a middle-aged man of distinct military bearing.

As he neared the couple, Hammond's hand reached up to straighten his tie. It was an idle gesture, yet filled with meaning, for it was a cue to which an answer must be given. The middle-aged man shot his cuffs back with a careless movement and then glanced at his watch. Hammond fingered one of the buttons of his vest. Signs of recognition had been given on both sides, according to the Department of Justice code.

"Hello, Hammond, I thought it was you," Colonel Ward called.

Hammond turned, his face lighted by a smile. "Well, if it isn't Ward!"

They shook hands cordially. Hammond glanced at the girl. Her eyes looked laughingly into his.

"Perhaps Colonel Ward would introduce us," she suggested.

"Pardon me. For sheer stupidity, I'd take any prize. Miss Nason, permit me to present Mr. Hammond. He's an old friend of mine. Still interested in California wines, Paul?"

"So much so that I suggest something stronger," Hammond replied.

They found a table in the cocktail room opening off the bar.

"I hope you and Miss Nason will have dinner with me," Hammond told Colonel Ward. "I am expecting some other friends, and would be delighted to have you join me."

"I'd be delighted," the girl said. Her eyes were on the figures standing at the bar, and her color heightened.

"If you'll excuse me," Hammond told the two, "I'll step out and see if my guests have come."

As Hammond stepped into the lobby, he saw a young man in a loose-fitting tuxedo seated in one corner, watching with indifferent eyes the throngs passing in and out.

"Mr. Arthur Haycox?" Hammond asked, stopping before him.

The man arose. "I am," he said.

"I am Paul Hammond. A mutual friend in New York suggested that I get in touch with you."

"A man whose initial might be D?"

Hammond grinned. "It might be," he admitted. "Could you have dinner with me and a party of friends?"

"Swell," said Haycox.

"Pardon me, there are two of them now."

Hammond had seen a couple crossing the lounge and coming in his direction. He arose and approached them. As the man's eyes met his, Hammond glanced at his watch. The man smoothed down his hair with a careless gesture. Hammond laughed into his handkerchief.

"Hello, major," he greeted the newcomer. "I've been looking for you."

"Kind of you to invite us. This is Miss Pierson. You've heard me—"

"Of course," Hammond broke in, "I'm charmed to meet you, Miss Pierson. I want to present Mr. Haycox, who is also honoring me tonight."

In another moment he was presenting the two to the newspaperman. Then he led them toward the cocktail room, where Nevel Mason and Colonel Ward were awaiting his return.

"We're all here now," he told his guests. "Let's go into the dining

room. The music has started already."

Nevel Mason looked up and smiled. "I've heard you're a wonderful dancer," she said to Hammond.

"A baseless rumor," he said, "but you'll soon know the worst."

They went toward the dining room, but as Hammond followed his guests through the arched door, he caught a glimpse of a girl in evening dress staring in his direction. A veil, thrown over her head, partially screened her features, but he caught a glimpse of tawny curls and hazel eyes, flecked with gold. His breath stopped for a moment. The girl was moving swiftly toward him.

"Careful," her low voice whispered. "They'll try to get you tonight."

"What? Who are—" he muttered.

But the woman had turned and was gone before he could finish his question.

WITH his guests on their way to the dining room, Paul Hammond had no time to pursue the woman whose mysterious warning had reached his ears. It was not the words which had startled him. It was her face, her hair, the golden flecks in the warm hazel eyes.

His suspicions were correct. There were two women. One was a copy of the other. But who was who and which was which? Was one a friend and the other an enemy? If so, he must swiftly determine their identity. He thought of telegraphing to D-1 for information, but such an act would be against their code. He must fight his own battle and win or lose.

His mind worked swiftly. If one of the women was Nevel Mason, the other would, naturally, be Bette Langwell. Bette might impersonate Nevel or—Nevel might impersonate her. Both were clever and fearless. The solution of his problems lay in the identity of these two.

Paul Hammond frowned when he entered the dining room and saw that the table reserved for him had been placed next to that occupied by Señor

Pombal and his group. There must be some reason for that, since he had given no such order. Then he saw that the waiter who had come to his room was serving the South American.

Hammond turned his attention to his guests. Nevel Nason was chatting with Arthur Haycox, asking him innumerable questions about newspaper work. Major Carter was also talking with Arthur Haycox and Colonel Ward and Miss Plerson had joined the throng on the dance floor. Nevel Mason smiled into Hammond's eyes.

He smiled back, asking:

"Do you rhumba?"

"A little."

They began dancing.

"I want to thank you for arranging such a dignified and correct meeting," he heard her murmur, when they had circled the floor. "It was very clever. How did you know that I had met Major Carter?"

"A friend mentioned it," he answered. "I believe you were going to tell me something of interest. What was it you said about—the Stone?"

He felt her slender figure stiffen. "Why are you so interested in the Stone?" she questioned.

"Stones have always intrigued me," he parried. "What was this interesting news?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you unless I am sure just who you are."

"You know my name—Paul Hammond. I am an agent for certain wine merchants—"

"Please don't tease me," she broke in.

He looked down into her face. It was serious.

"I might reply that I don't know who you are," he countered.

She glanced around, her eyes watching the South Americans at the table. She raised herself until her lips almost touched his ear.

"I told you over the telephone," she breathed.

"That meant nothing to me."

"Then perhaps this does." Her voice was scarcely audible against the barbaric throb of the orchestra. "KL—47—ATU—93."

For a moment, Paul Hammond lost the rhythm of the dance. The letters and numerals were D-1 signals, to be used only in extreme emergency. They called for an answering signal in the same code. No excuse could be offered for using them except in a case of life or death.

The girl was looking up into his face, her own quivering with eagerness. For a moment, Hammond hesitated. Nevel Mason might be facing a dangerous dilemma and be appealing to him for aid.

They were dancing past the table they had left a few minutes before. Hammond caught a glimpse of the waiter who had come to his room. The man had left the table occupied by the South Americans and was sliding a card beneath Nevel's plate.

The doubt vanished from Hammond's face.

"I said KL—47—ATU—93." Tension sounded in the girl's voice, but the friendly smile on the man's face told her that she had met defeat.

"I'm afraid you have made a mistake, Miss Nason," Hammond said. "I don't understand you."

"Don't understand, when you—"

"I told you I represented certain wine merchants of Bordeaux, France. They are interested in California wines," said Paul Hammond.

THE dance ended with a blare of horns, and Hammond escorted his partner back to the table. He saw her glance in the direction of the waiter serving the South Americans, but he could not see her expression. The conversation around the table was resumed. Nevel, however, was plainly distracted. Hammond watched her slide the card from beneath her plate, read it and then tear it into bits. In another moment, her plate was withdrawn and carried away, the torn card upon it.

Seated with his back to Señor Pom-bal's table, Paul Hammond could hear snatches of conversation. They were speaking in English. A trip to Chinatown was being discussed.

Hammond's eyes met the alert orbs of Arthur Haycox. The newspaperman smiled and glanced toward Señor Pom-bal's table. Haycox, too, had overheard what was being said, yet neither Hammond nor the newshawk spoke of it. It was Nevel Nason who introduced the subject.

"I've often heard of the wonders of Chinatown," she remarked to Haycox.

"Quite a place," the newspaperman agreed. "Would you like to see it?"

"I'd love to," Nevel's eyes were flashing again, and her cheeks burned with animation.

"We'll go right after dinner." Then to Paul Hammond, "Unless our host has other plans."

Hammond nodded his approval.

When their meal was finished, they hurried into their wraps. Hammond went to his room for his hat and coat, pausing to glance at the radio set. On the tape were several messages in dots and dashes, and the wax cylinder which recorded conversations also showed signs of having picked up words or phrases. However, he had no time to study them. His guests were awaiting him below.

He hurried downstairs, to find Arthur Haycox standing alone in the lounge.

"Let's take a cab by ourselves," the reporter said in a low tone. "I have something to tell you."

IN a few minutes the party was complete, and taxicabs were summoned. The two army officers and their women companions took the first car, while Hammond and the reporter entered the second. Soon they were isolated in the heaviest fog the young man had ever seen. He glanced out as they started down the steep hill leading to the Oriental section.

Looking over the driver's shoulder, he could not see fifteen feet ahead. Street lamps were blobs of pale light at regular intervals. The ghost of a cable car swam out of the mists.

In spite of their isolation, Haycox glanced around, as though he were looking to see if they could be overheard. Then he said:

"I've suspected for several days that something big was brewing in this man's town. So I nosed around and came across—"

"Hey, what's the matter?" they heard the chauffeur yell.

Hammond glanced ahead. The rays of a red lantern were shining through the fog—a lantern that waved wildly as if it sought to give warning of immediate danger. The chauffeur threw on his brakes, and the taxicab came to a stop with shrill, complaining shrieks.

Arms reached up to drag the driver from his seat. Then the side doors were thrown open. Brown faces appeared in the dim rays of the cab's dome light. A pistol flashed, and Hammond saw Arthur Haycox slump forward in his seat. Hammond snatched the weapon from a bandit's hand. He raised the muzzle to fire, but a tongue of flame spat at him and he felt a hammerlike blow in the chest.

Then the gun in his own hand roared, and the brown face disappeared. Another shot rang out, and once more he felt the impact of a bullet which struck his right side.

Hammond leaped from the cab. He had one of the highwaymen's pistols, and his own was in the other hand. But as he faced his assailants, they melted away into the fog. Only the red lantern was visible. Through the heavy mist came many sounds. Automobile horns squawked, and there was the shrill call of a police whistle, and the clamor of a cable car that had stopped when its gripman saw the taxicab squarely in his path.

Hammond turned to Arthur Haycox. The reporter was still alive, but breathing heavily. Hammond lifted

him into a position where he could lie back against the cushions.

"Hard hit?" Hammond asked anxiously.

"I guess this is it," muttered the reporter. "Funny—to go out like this. . . . Bend closer. . . . Listen. . . . the Stone—" His breathing was more strained. Ghastly gurgles came from his throat.

"The Stone—what does that mean?" Hammond dropped to his knees as he saw the dying man's lips move.

"The Stone—and the Laughing Ghoul. . . . Don't you understand? . . . The Stone—is the Rock—" Another spasmodic gurgling rose from deep in the man's throat, and then a dry rattle. Arthur Haycox had died before he had completed his message, but its import sent the blood rushing through Hammond's veins.

CHAPTER IV

THE GOLDEN-EYED GIRL

FOR a moment, Paul Hammond stood spell-bound. Then he heard the clump of heavy footsteps behind him, and turned to see two policemen rushing toward him. "What happened?" they demanded, when they saw the limp form of Arthur Haycox sprawled across the seat.

"Hold-up, or something like that," Hammond answered. "I think I hit one of them."

One of the policemen drew his electric torch and flashed it on the cobbled street. He found a splotch of blood, and marks where a wounded man had been dragged away, but the trail quickly ended.

"They drove off. Here's where their car stopped," he called through the mist.

There was more clangor from the cable car. One of the policemen mounted the box and guided the cab to the curb.

"Dirty business, mister. Could you identify any of 'em?"

"No. They looked something like South Americans, but—"

"Say, what the—"

The policeman bent to look at Hammond's shirt front. The immaculate white was marred with powder burns and a large round hole.

"You've been hit! Hurt bad?"

"No. I have a bullet-proof vest."

"Bullet-proof vest—two gats? Say, brother, we're going to have to take you in. This looks a lot different right now."

But before the police could take Paul Hammond to the Hall of Justice, the cars which had driven Carter and Ward down the hill re-appeared through the fog. They, too, had heard the shots, and had circled back. Hammond flashed a signal to Carter as he joined the growing circle around the taxicab, and the major drew one of the policemen aside. After that, there was no further talk of arrest.

"Would you mind going down with the body?" Hammond asked Carter a few minutes later. "There's something I've got to look after right away."

"All right, but—" The major's eyes flicked to where Nevel Mason was alighting from her cab.

"I'll look after her," Hammond told him. "Have Ward take that other girl away. I don't want to have anyone around."

A moment later, Nevel appeared. Her eyes, fixed on Paul Hammond, immediately saw the powder marks and hole in his shirt front.

"You've been wounded?" she gasped.

He shook his head and grinned. "Gangsters and kings are not the only ones to wear armor," he remarked.

The cabs and police were moving away. The cable car passed on. Before Nevel realized it, she and Paul Hammond were alone in the thick fog. Her face was raised to his, her eyes filled with inquiry, as they stood beneath the glowing gas light.

"It's only a step back to the hotel," he told her, "and I thought per-

haps there was something you wanted to say to me."

"I've said all I dared," she murmured.

"All right. Shall we go?"

She hesitated, staring around, trying to penetrate the thick blanket of mist that surrounded them. Out beyond the range of their vision they could hear footsteps. Then a voice called in guarded accents. Nevel clutched Hammond's arm and started up the hill.

"Come," she whispered. "They're still here."

"Thought they might be," the man answered. "That's why I wanted you along—for protection."

"Hiding behind my skirts?" she mocked.

"No, but—"

"Then suppose we decide to work together." A certain quality in her voice made him look in her direction but the fog was so thick that her features seemed blurred.

"I don't understand," he parried.

"I believe I once said—KL—47—ATU—93."

Hammond glanced at her again. In spite of the fog, he caught a flash of eagerness in her eyes. Once more the words of the chief in the D-1's darkened room flashed through his mind. The game was desperate. The stakes were human lives. He could not take a chance.

"I don't believe I understand you," he said.

THE girl was silent. Then a peal of laughter rang out. Paul Hammond started. Mirth was bizarre at that moment. That laugh must be a signal, a warning to some unseen accomplice.

"What's funny?" he demanded. "It seems to me that—"

There was a rush of footsteps through the mists, and Paul Hammond's words were cut short as a ponderous figure leaped upon him. He felt an impact between his shoulder blades. A knife bit through his

topcoat and evening clothes, but stopped when it encountered the meshes of his bullet-proof vest.

Hammond twisted around and grappled with his assailant. For the second time within half an hour, he had been saved from death by the bullet-proof vest the chief had given him. D-1 had realized what he would face when he reached San Francisco.

Hammond tried to get a glimpse of his adversary, but he had been attacked between two street lamps, and the enfolding fog blotted out all light.

"Give me your gun," the man growled to Nevel Mason.

"Here, Danny," she said.

The knife clattered to the concrete sidewalk.

Hammond struggled to hold his adversary where he could not use the weapon, but it was futile. There was a roar like the sound of a cannon, so close was the exploding weapon. A blow knocked the breath from Hammond's body, but the bullet-proof vest held back the lethal ball. He relaxed, sinking forward, and his opponent struggled free.

"Did you kill him?" the woman asked.

"Got him all right."

The shrill sound of a police whistle came from the encircling mists. The shot had been heard by unseen patrolmen.

"Come, Danny, we must go," the woman urged.

Paul half-raised himself. The woman saw, and snatched the pistol from the man's hand.

Scalding flame raked across Hammond's scalp. Then deeper darkness descended, and he fell back, senseless. But even as he sank, he fought to regain consciousness. He must act—act swiftly. He could not die—not yet.

The dazzling rays of an electric torch held close to his face brought back consciousness. He looked up to see a ring of faces around him. Two policemen stood at his feet. Beside him knelt a woman with tawny curls. The wavering beam of one of the

patrolman's flashlights fell on her face. Paul looked into her eyes. They were hazel and flecked with gold.

"Nevel," he murmured.

A flush crossed her cheek. "I told you to be careful," she whispered.

"Tell me," Hammond gripped her hand. "You are Nevel and she is—"

"S-s-h-h! We are not alone. I shall see you soon, if possible."

She arose and turned to the police.

"It looks like a rather ugly scalp wound, but nothing serious. You had better take him to his hotel, the Danvers."

"Yes, miss. And can we get your name as a witness?"

"Of course, Miss Bette Langwell, Hamilton Hotel, just across the street."

"Yes, miss. Thank you."

Paul Hammond stared incredulously as the woman turned and melted into the fog. Bette Langwell! The most dangerous woman in the world! It couldn't be. She should be his enemy, an employee of Señor Pombal.

The young man sat up and felt his head. It was splitting, but he was not seriously injured. He struggled to his feet with the aiding hand of one of the policemen.

"This way to the hotel, mister," the man said. "I'll go along, and you can give me a statement when you're feeling a little better."

THE Danvers' house physician made quick work of dressing Hammond's wound, but there was nothing in his skill that could calm the storm raging through the young man's mind. Nevel Nason! Bette Langwell! Both were in San Francisco. Which was which? Each failed completely to act in keeping with her name. Nevel should be a friendly aid, even though she was not a member of the D-1 organization. Yet she had tried to murder him. And Bette Langwell, the most dangerous woman in the world, the natural ally of the

notorious Señor Pombal, had saved him. It didn't make sense.

He rid himself of the policeman by giving him a nebulous statement. He dared not give the facts. Police action might hurry his foe's plans ahead and leave him groping in the fog. He must work out the case before anyone was arrested.

"I'll go down to the Hall tomorrow if you need me," he informed the policeman, "but tonight I shall be very busy."

The officer winked knowingly. "The name was Miss Bette Langworth, Hamilton Hotel," he said with a smile.

"Yes, I heard it."

"Pleasant dreams, sir."

"Thanks, officer. Good-by."

But Paul Hammond had no time for dreams. Arthur Haycox's last words had opened a window and given him a view that filled his mind with fears. The Stone is the Rock! the Rock—that was Alcatraz And the Laughing Ghoul was a mysterious phantom-like underworld genius who had disappeared from the face of the earth eight months ago.

Was Max Ulrich the Laughing Ghoul? Was Señor Pombal? Or had the Laughing Ghoul hidden his identity among the numbered men on Alcatraz?

As Hammond paced up and down the room, his eyes fell upon his radio equipment. He had forgotten it in the high excitement of Haycox's murder and the identification of the two women who were playing major rôles in the shadowed drama. He took up the wax cylinder. Several inches of fine lines showed that speech had been recorded. He placed the record on the reproducing instrument and started it. First came the sound of the needle running across the wax. Then a man's voice began speaking.

"Well, Mr. Hammond, I'm sorry that I shall not have the pleasure of saying good-by to you personally, but duty calls," the voice began. "However, we shall probably meet again,

and when we do, I am afraid it will be my unpleasant duty to kill you. It is a step that I shall regret, but it may be necessary."

The voice ceased, and Hammond shut off the machine. Then he played the record again. He studied the intonations of that voice. He was sure that the last time he heard it was in the fog. Max Ulrich had had a voice like that. Max Ulrich had hairy hands. Max Ulrich and Nevel Nason had tried to kill him, and either they or their agents had murdered Arthur Haycox.

The thought that at last he had a definite lead spurred Hammond to fresh activity. He got in touch with Alcatraz and ordered a checkup on prisoners, and on any activity of any sort around the Rock. Other agents were directed to throw out a dragnet for Nevel Nason and Max Ulrich.

Morning was near when Paul went to bed, yet he was up again before seven, watching the man who was operating his radio apparatus.

"Haven't raised anything worth mentioning," the expert complained.

Hammond paced up and down the room. He was sure that the members of the gang would not stay together. Messages would have to be sent—but how?

"Try this hook-up with the small set and connect it with the wax cylinder," he instructed his aid. "Use the gas pipes for one terminal and the water for the other. It gives a metal circuit and ordinarily would not attract attention."

The radio expert grinned. This was a new line of attack.

"Okay," he said.

"Keep at it," Hammond instructed. "I'll be back by noon."

Hammond spent a busy morning with D. J. agents but failed to uncover any new leads. When he got back to his room his operator said: "Ain't much in the telegraph, but that wax cylinder has been running lately."

Hammond hurriedly put the record

on his reproducing machine. Almost instantly he heard a man's voice speaking—a voice with which he was now familiar.

"Better go down to the Martel street warehouse and inspect what Harolds has been doing," the man began.

Hammond stiffened as he awaited the reply. It came in a woman's voice, a voice that brought a vision of tawny curls.

"Be careful, Danny, be careful."

A rush of blood swept across the young man's face as he returned the cylinder to its place. He felt his heart pounding. His word trap had caught something whose importance might be colossal. He turned to the radio operator.

"Catch this out of the air?" he asked.

"No. From that trick connection you suggested last night, in case the air failed."

"The gas and water pipes?"

"Yes, sir. That was a great idea. It gives a perfect metallic circuit. Not one man in a million would think of it," the radio man said.

"It was used in Paris during the war by the Germans," Hammond informed him. "These crooks aren't overlooking any tricks."

He consulted a real estate map of the city. The warehouse on Martel street was right on the waterfront.

A few minutes later, he was in a taxicab.

CHAPTER V

LETHAL LOOT

FOG still enveloped San Francisco. The sun was only a light spot in a field of unending gray.

As they dropped down toward the waterfront, the fog thickened, and the cab was forced to go at a snail's pace. Stops were made to read street signs and consult the numbers on the houses. Finally the taxi came to a halt, and the driver gestured though the mists ahead.

"It ought to be the next house," he told Hammond. "But there's a big limousine just ahead of me."

Hammond leaped out. He could see only a few feet in front of him, but through the mist he could hear a man and woman talking. Once more he recognized the voices.

"In another twenty-four hours—" the man began.

"S-s-s-sh, Danny—"

A door slammed and the black limousine glided into the fog.

Paul Hammond lunged after it, but collided with a pedestrian hurrying through the mists. The pedestrian grumbled an oath, and moved on his way. The race was lost.

ONCE more Hammond was alone, but the blood tingled through his veins as he realized that he was close to a discovery that might prove the climax of his case. He groped through the fog until he had found the warehouse. He went to the door, where a man answered his knock.

"Inspector from the Building Department," Hammond told him. "Have you a permit for this work?"

The man grinned, and took an official-looking envelope from his pocket.

"There you are," he said.

Hammond scanned the permit. It was issued in the name of Chester Harolds for the installation of new lighting fixtures.

"May I inspect the work?"

"Certainly. Right this way."

Harolds led the way in. Workmen were engaged in installing fixtures. The work was innocent—almost too innocent, Hammond reflected, but he could find no flaw in it.

"Okay. Sorry to have bothered you," he finally told Harolds.

"Oh, that's all right. Drop in any time. Glad to see the city inspectors. Have a cigar."

Paul Hammond returned to the street and inspected the houses near the warehouse. Two doors down, an excited maid answered his summons

and peered through a crack in the door when he announced himself as an inspector for the San Francisco Building Department.

"Who's there, Mathilda?" a woman's voice asked, as the servant stammered that no work was being done.

"City inspector, Miss Langwell. He wants to—"

Paul Hammond shoved his foot into the partially opened door. His hand slid to the automatic pistol he carried in an under-arm holster. He transferred it to a side pocket with a single flashing movement, Bette Langwell lived there! He had found what he was looking for, after all. The most dangerous woman in the world was not at the Hamilton Hotel, as she had told the police.

"I should like to see your mistress," Hammond told the maid.

"She's not well. She isn't seeing anybody," the woman quavered.

"She'll see me," the man said stubbornly. "Please tell her that Mr. Paul Hammond would like to talk to her."

"Then let me close the door, sir. This draft—"

"I'm keeping it open," Hammond broke in.

The maid retired in confusion. He could hear her speaking in a high-pitched voice. There was a moment of silence, and then the door was thrown open.

"Won't you come in, Mr. Hammond?"

Hammond looked into hazel eyes flecked with gold. Curls of tawny shade half-circled the woman's neck.

"I'm sorry, Miss Langwell, but—really I haven't had an opportunity to thank you for your kindness before."

"Please don't mention it." Her smile widened. "And what was it you wanted to see me about?"

"I think you know that," he parried.

She shook her head.

"Which side are you on, Miss Langwell?" he asked in a lowered tone.

The hazel eyes met his unwaveringly. "I'm afraid I don't understand you," she said.

"Does D-1 mean anything to you?" he pressed.

Once more she shook her head. "I'm afraid it doesn't," she replied.

"How does it happen you have left the hotel?" was his next question.

"I'm tired of hotels. I thought I would try this."

"And you picked this house quite by accident?"

"Quite."

Paul Hammond arose and turned toward the door. He had too many important things demanding his attention to waste his time fencing with Bette Langwell. She was too skilled in the art of verbal combat to permit him to trap her in a short conversation.

"Sorry to have bothered you, Miss Langwell," he said when he had reached the door.

"I'm delighted to see you again. Won't you call again?"

She knew that she had triumphed in their short passage of arms. Both were playing a game and realized that the other's pretenses had no more substance than the fog outside. Hammond took up the gauntlet.

"I'll be charmed to call."

"Any time, Mr. Hammond. I seldom leave the house," Bette Langwell told him.

HAMMOND hurried back to his taxicab and gave orders to return to the Danvers. He must get in touch with D. J. and summon a swarm of aids. Max Ulrich and Nevel Nason must be found and watched, night and day. A cordon of agents must be stationed around the house in which Bette Langwell lived. The world's most dangerous woman was too great a menace to be left undisturbed. Señor Pombal must also be watched.

Reaching his rooms, Hammond found the radio operator tingling with excitement. Further conversa-

tions had been recorded upon the wax cylinder that tapped a circuit composed of the gas and water pipes. Hammond quickly transferred the record to his reproducing machine. He listened, his breath held in.

"We have little time to lose. He's found the warehouse," a man's voice said. "Harolds just telephoned me that he is posing as a building inspector."

A hard smile thinned Paul Hammond's lips.

"Perhaps it was not he," the woman answered.

"You underestimate your favorite enemy, Nevel," was the reply. "You'd better get in touch with Pombal and tell them—"

"Leave that to me," she broke in hurriedly, "and stop communicating. If he is as clever as you think, Danny, this circuit may be tapped at any minute."

"And your orders, Nevel?"

"Finish as quickly as possible."

"Today?"

"Yes."

The record ended with that word. Paul Hammond stared at the wax cylinder, his face slightly pale. Today! He had not even minutes to lose. Before him was evidence that not only disclosed a plot, but identified the principals. He took the record from the machine and handed it to the radio operator.

"Tell your laboratory chief to have those sounds translated into light and photographed," he ordered.

"Photographed?"

"That's right. There's nothing like the picture of a voice. It's convincing."

"And my orders, sir?"

"Carry on. I'm going out. Stay here until I get back or—" Hammond paused. He might not get back. He sat down and wrote a message in code to D-1, outlining what he had discovered and what his next steps might be. This he handed to the radio operator.

"If I'm not back in twenty-four

hours, send that," he said. "And keep watch of that cylinder."

"Yes, sir."

Thrusting a second automatic into his pocket, Hammond hurried to the *porte cochère* and again summoned a taxicab to take him to the waterfront. Although the fog still enshrouded the city, the gray vapors that screened the operations of enemy agents were thinning rapidly before Hammond's eyes. He was sure of his ground now. He was certain of his foes' objective, and their method of attack was beginning to appear. He would soon confirm his suspicions. His first step must be to thwart his adversary's plot and then capture the criminals.

Reaching Martel street, he dismissed his cab. Then he swiftly made his way toward the gaunt warehouse. The structure was right on the water's edge. In fact, the warehouse extended well out over the water. Hammond circled three sides of the place, and found it much larger than he had suspected.

On the third side of the warehouse he saw a small grimy window set about six feet up from the ground. He searched the adjoining lot till he selected a discarded packing case. This he stealthily pulled over under the window, and mounting the case quietly went to work on the window's lock. It was a matter of seconds before he was slowly inching up the window.

Opening the window was the dangerous part. The glass was so grimy that he couldn't see through it—and that screened his movements. But the fog was not dense enough to black-out his silhouette when he opened the window. It was a chance he'd have to take. And the thought of Max Ulrich, Señor Pombal and the South American's band of gunmen was not encouraging.

Hammond shrugged, opened the window high enough to crawl through. His gun in his hand, he legged over the sill and hung on the inside long enough to again close the

window. Then he lowered himself to the floor of the warehouse. There was no challenge; no crash of gunfire; no twinkling knife thudding into his back.

The young agent heaved a vast sigh of relief. It was some moments before his eyes became accustomed to the gloom of the warehouse. And when they did, he made out a row of huge metal cylinders.

"Petrol tanks," he murmured. "Now, what the hell—"

He moved closer and discovered that each cylindrical tank had a petcock near the bottom. Suddenly, a door slammed on the Martel street side of the warehouse. Three-quarters of the Martel side was walled off into offices with one street door; leaving the rest of the warehouse a barnlike, silent void.

Hammond crouched down, swinging his gun to cover the offices. And it was while in this tense, strained position that he first noticed the strangeness of the water sounds beneath the floor of the warehouse. Those sounds didn't have the dull lapping noise of water washing around rotting stanchions. The sound was more like water lapping against something metallic and hollow. Hammond took the chance of whisking his flash about the floor.

The white beam momentarily flicked over the iron ring of a trapdoor. The ring was about three feet from where Hammond crouched. He put away his flash and gun, and, using both hands on the ring, noiselessly raised the trap. Fog-clouded daylight coming in under the water-side of the shed dully reflected on smooth steel plates.

Hammond stared at the thing for several moments. It was a baby submarine; its conning tower open and directly under the trapdoor. Hammond lowered the trap. There was a hard, tight smile on his face. Max Ulrich and Señor Pombal had planned well.

There came a flurry of movement

and rasp of voices from the direction of the offices. Then there was a sudden, ominous silence. Hammond flicked out his gun. He knew that his presence in the warehouse had been discovered. And he was doubly sure when he heard the packing case he had climbed on scrape against the outside wall. Some one had spotted the packing case. Hammond stood ready, waiting for the opening of hostilities.

That came sooner than he had expected. A bullet whanged off the rim of the nearest metal tank. The gun sound had been muffled by a Maxim silencer. Then Max Ulrich's angry voice came from one of the offices:

"Be careful of those tanks!"

Hammond flicked his wrist and threw a shot toward the voice. There was no silencer on his gun, and the roar of it filled the warehouse.

Ulrich growled: "Take him, you fools! He's alone."

Hammond crouched down by the tanks, and slowly moved down the line turning on the petcock of each tank. Then he rounded the last tank, and waited. Petrol fumes bit his nostrils. And, in the tense silence, he was again conscious of the water lapping the hull of the submarine. He could feel that men were closing in on him. But he crouched there, waiting for one thing to happen. It did.

A man suddenly gasped. There was a scraping sound, and a jarring thud. Hammond fired at the thud. A frightful gurgling sound told him that he had scored. Then he calmly waited for the next of his foes to lose balance on the slippery petrol-coated floor. And while he waited, a lashing blow came out of nowhere and banged the side of his head. There was a sudden yell—and men swarmed all over him. The gun was torn from his grasp.

Max Ulrich called from the office: "Bring him in here! You know what to do with that clumsy dope who got himself shot. . . . then all of you get down in the sub—and stay there. Move!"

When Hammond was taken into the office, he said: "Well, hello—Danny. So we meet again. And I learned that you plan to murder me."

"I may find it necessary," said Max Ulrich.

Turns of a rope bound Hammond's hands. He was thrust into a chair, and his legs were tied. Max Ulrich sat down.

"We've seen quite a little of each other lately, haven't we?" the man began.

Hammond nodded.

"But this is our last meeting," Ulrich continued.

"I'm sorry. I had looked forward to seeing quite a little of you before you went—into retirement."

"I knew you had that in mind, but I have other plans," Ulrich retorted, a velvet softness coming into his voice.

Hammond eyed the man narrowly, saying: "So you're Danny, eh? I once heard of a Danny Davids—in Chicago, I believe. He was a cheap heel who got mixed up in the murder of a night-club dancer. He skipped town. Must have changed his name—"

"Your words sadden me," Max Ulrich broke in. "They make your passing an absolute necessity. I had hoped to avoid anything quite so drastic, but it is beyond my power now to dodge a painful duty."

"They hang murderers in California," Hammond reminded him.

The smile returned to Ulrich's aristocratic face. "I have been told by competent legal talent," he replied, "that in order to establish murder, it is necessary to have a *corpus delicti*."

Hammond nodded. "And so?" he prompted curiously.

"And so—with the aid of a very clever confrère," the man went on, "a rather neat plan has been evolved."

"That's interesting. May I ask—"

"Of course. Our plan is to surround you with some tins of T.N.T. When it is detonated, there will be

nothing left upon which to base a charge of murder. I hope I'm not being too—er—graphic."

"Not at all," said Hammond. "And your companion is a lady of ideas. Please convey my compliments to her."

MAX ULRICH and Paul Hammond sat facing each other for several minutes. Neither spoke. Then Ulrich crossed the room to where a radio instrument stood upon a low stand. Hammond's searching eyes saw that it had wires, one running to the radiator and the other to the gas connection in the fireplace. It was the circuit which he had tapped in the Danvers Hotel.

Ulrich switched on a small light and waited for a few moments. Then the lamp winked out.

"Hello," he said.

An answer came in a woman's voice. Hammond kicked at his bonds, loosening them, but he dared not free himself as long as Ulrich was in the room.

"You had better come down here at once," Ulrich continued. "I have him tied up, and am soon going to follow your almost inspired suggestion."

Hammond stiffened. Then Nevel had suggested that he be blown to bits. But the thought fled from his mind when he heard the words now coming over the secret circuit.

"Our friend, the Señor Pombal, demands immediate action."

"We're ready," Ulrich replied.

"Good!" Nevel said.

The man switched off the light and glanced at Paul Hammond. "Make yourself at home, my friend," he said, striding toward the door. "I'll see you again before—before you leave us."

HAMMOND could hear Ulrich and the man named Harolds talking in the warehouse. The minutes dragged as Hammond worked with his bonds. Fully a half hour must have gone by before he

succeeded in freeing his feet. Then he stole toward the radio set and snapped the switch, as he had seen Ulrich do. He waited until the tubes had time to warm. Then he began speaking.

"Hello—hello," he called into the transmitter in a lowered voice. "This is Paul Hammond speaking. I'm being held at the Martel Street warehouse on the waterfront. They are preparing to raid Alcatraz in a submarine and release a prisoner who was once known as the Laughing Ghoul. The submarine is manned with a light naval gun and machine guns. Send all the men you can spare. Señor Pombal is supplying the sub. Nevel Nason and Max Ulrich are—"

"You are wasting your time, Mr. Hammond," a voice said behind him.

Hammond twisted to see a tawny head of curls bared as Nevel Nason took off her little hat.

"That isn't a radio. It doesn't broadcast," she went on.

A faked expression of frustration came to his face. Yet he contrived to leave the switch open.

"I'd hoped," he began, "to—"

The girl held up her hand and looked around, as though listening.

"Perhaps I can help you," she whispered. "You know I am D-7, although you have refused to acknowledge me. Do you remember what I once said to you?"

He shook his head.

"I said—KL—47—ATU—93."

Paul Hammond stared straight into the girl's eyes. They were brown, not hazel. She was giving the secret signal of distress, although it was his life, not hers, that was in danger. If she was an operative, his answer would bring her aid; if an enemy, he would be putting fresh power into her hands. Once more he searched her eyes, and made his decision.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

The soft lines of her mouth tight-

TSD

ened, but she kept herself in control.

"Mr. Hammond, there's so little time. Don't you understand? These people are going to kill you unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you help yourself and let me help you. If you'll only—"

"Answer some cryptic cross-word puzzle I don't know anything about?"

"You know what I mean, Mr. Hammond."

He smiled up into her eyes. "Really, I don't," he insisted.

Her gaze hardened.

"Danny," she called down the stairs in commanding tone. "Danny, come here."

There was a clatter on the steps.

"Take this stubborn idiot and hold him till we come back from the Rock," she ordered. "The fool will do nothing. I am through with him."

Max Ulrich looked at his prisoner. "I'm sorry," he said, "but you heard the orders."

"There doesn't seem to be much I can do about it," Hammond answered. "What would you do? You have had much experience, Danny Davids."

He was trying to engage the man in conversation, to use up precious minutes. The words Hammond had spoken into the transmitter of the secret circuit would be recorded in wax in his room at the Danvers. If the radio operator reproduced them immediately, help would soon be on the way. He must gain time.

"I'm sorry, but we cannot wait," Ulrich replied.

"Will you answer one question?" Hammond asked.

"Perhaps."

"Is she really Nevel Nason or—"

"That's something only she can answer," Ulrich broke in, "and, unfortunately, you'll never have the opportunity to ask her. Come, my friend, we must go."

Hammond still hung back. He said: "You and Señor Pombal have worked very neatly to break out the Laughing Ghoul. Here's the way I

figure the business: The Ghoul and Pombal were running dope and slaves between New York and Rio. Things got hot for the Ghoul. He ducked out—with all the cash. The law caught up with him in some way—and he went to Alcatraz under an assumed name."

"Very interesting," Ulrich murmured. "You are digging deeper into a grave every time you open that mouth of yours."

"Señor Pombal wanted his money," went on Hammond, edging closer to the transmitting instrument, "and the only way he could get it was to get the Ghoul off the Rock. And you brought that message to Pombal."

Max Ulrich looked sharply at Hammond. "You seem very definite about that."

"Very," agreed Hammond.

At that moment Harolds came into the office smoking a cigarette. He put the cigarette down in an ash tray. "Everything's ready, chief. When the spick gets here, we'll shove off."

Hammond picked up the cigarette with his bound hands and put it into his mouth. The natural ease with which he did it attracted no attention from the two men.

Max Ulrich jerked his head toward the warehouse, pushed his gun closer to Hammond. All three started through the doorway. Harolds hesitated a moment, then yelled:

"That bum chiseled my butt!"

Hammond kept right on walking, straight across the warehouse floor. Ulrich was right behind him and to his left. Hammond took the cigarette from his mouth, held it between thumb and middle finger, then shot it straight toward the petrol tanks. The glowing butt fell short of the tanks and landed on the petrol-soaked floor.

A sheet of flame raced over the boards, hungrily enveloped the tanks. Even before Ulrich and Harolds could comprehend what had happened, one of the tanks went up with a terrific roar. A river of fire washed

over the warehouse, tumbled down the trapdoor into the open conning tower of the submarine.

Ulrich fired at Hammond, hit the young agent in the left arm. But Hammond's fists lashed at Ulrich's jaw. The blow knocked Ulrich six feet back across the warehouse. Harolds was running for his life toward the offices.

Hammond's bound hands dragged Ulrich into the office. The terrified Harolds was there, with his hands in the air. Five G-men were there, too. One of them cut Hammond's bonds. Another was telephoning for a chemical fire detachment. Martel street was alive with police cars.

Hammond said: "Take these two out. The others are either dead or trapped down in the submarine. Get out the harbor patrol and the flying detail. If the sub noses out, the airplanes can lay a depth bomb on it."

When the instructions were given, the G-man agent-in-charge told Hammond: "We picked up Pombal as he was leaving his hotel. And Colonel Ward gave me this address to hand to you."

Hammond quickly took the slip of paper. Then he rushed to the street and caught a cab. The address turned out to be a private residence, and the door was opened by Colonel Ward. The men shook hands briefly and then went up the stairs and into a small living room. In it were two women, with several D. J. agents standing guard over them.

"What shall I do with them?" Colonel Ward asked.

Hammond's eyes went from one to another. Seated side by side, their likeness was not great. Both had tawny curls, pert mouths and eyes of light brown.

"Have you anything to say to me?" The young man spoke to the woman he had known as Nevel Nason.

"Nothing but KL-47-ATU-93," she answered in a soft voice.

"And you?" he asked the girl he had known as Bette Langwell.

Hazel eyes, flecked with gold, looked frankly into his.

"Anything to say, Miss Langwell?"

She shook her head.

"Put them both under arrest and hold them *incommunicado*," Hammond ordered.

A BLACK-ROBED figure whose features were screened by a mask faced a ring of upturned eyes. Only the eyes were visible, eager eyes which peered through slits.

"Ten days ago, in New York, I told you the reason for these masks," the man in the center began. "I said at that time that there might be a traitor in our ranks. I was right. There was then. There is, now."

A subdued murmur went around the circle, but no word was spoken.

"The problem that has been worked out in this operation," the chief of D-1 went on, "is one worth careful study. I flew out from New York, myself, in order to be present at its exposition, as I believe it one of the most complex and interesting cases I have ever encountered. It has two unusual features, and I am going to let the man who solved it explain his operations."

The chief of the secret corps stepped to one side and made a gesture. Paul Hammond arose and took the center of the circle. His eyes traveled from one masked face to another. They paused at two slender figures seated opposite him, with a broad-shouldered form between. From the edge of two cowls, tawny curls peered out, but the faces were blotted out by velvet masks.

"You are familiar with the case, my friends," Hammond began, "so I won't rehash the details. Señor Pombal and the man known as Max Ulrich are under arrest and will be convicted. Their execution is merely a matter of court routine."

The D-1 chief broke in: "There seems to be one great flaw in the case. The Laughing Ghoul has not been identified—and the secret hiding

place of his fabulous riches is still a secret to us."

"The Laughing Ghoul died on Alcatraz last night," said Hammond. "The excitement of the expected escape, and then the despair at its failure to materialize was too much for his seventy-year-old heart."

"His name?" asked the chief.

Hammond looked across to where Max Ulrich was handcuffed to a chair. "The man who died on Alcatraz last night was Maxwell Davids alias the Laughing Ghoul. He was the father of our prisoner, whose real name is Daniel Davids. You see, Daniel Davids had possession of that wealth. We located most of it in deposit boxes. But he used it as bait to enlist Señor Pombal's aid in effecting the prison break. Daniel Davids was double-crossing Pombal right from the start. But Pombal had the submarine and the guns to blast the walls of Alcatraz.

"Now, we'll look to the evidence that will bind Daniel Davids to Bette Langwell. This I propose to do in a scientific manner. The voice, you know, has characteristics as marked as the fingerprints. Even dull ears recognize voices, but science is more sure. It defies trickery. Let me demonstrate."

Hammond turned to a portable phonograph he had set up in the center of the circle. He touched a lever, and a voice sounded.

"You underestimate your favorite enemy, Nevel," a man was heard to say. "You'd better get in touch with Señor Pombal."

Hammond cut off the phonograph. Then he flashed a strange picture upon a white sheet hung against a wall. It looked like a child's drawing of a mountain range.

"This is a photograph of that voice speaking those words," he explained to his assembled fellow operatives. Now he produced a carbon-covered paper and affixed a steel stylus to it. Then he ordered Daniel Davids to stand before a microphone.

"Will you repeat those words, please?" he said to his captive.

The prisoner scowled. Then he spoke rapidly. The stylus flew back and forth, recording the rise and fall of the voice.

"There," Hammond said a moment later. "If you'll study those two records, you'll see that they are identical."

He turned to lead Daniel Davids from the room.

SILENCE gripped the circle as Paul Hammond took his place again. He had spoken of the most dangerous woman in the world.

"And now for the woman," he said, "the woman responsible for the murder of Arthur Haycox in an attempt on my life."

Hammond glanced at one of the slender figures directly in front of him. Her long, tapering fingers were clasping and unclasping.

"Once more I shall use the phonograph which trapped communications over a circuit made by the gas and water systems of San Francisco," the young man began. "This time you will hear the woman's voice. It will identify her in spite of make-up, dyed hair and the arts of a great actress."

Again the phonograph sounded. This time a woman's voice was speaking.

"Leave that to me," were the words that came out, "and stop communicating. If he is as clever as you think, Danny, this circuit may be tapped at any minute."

Hammond shut off the phonograph. "The circuit had already been tapped," he told his companions. "And now for the test. First I will show you the photograph of that voice, and then I will ask two of you to repeat the words just spoken."

Again a picture like a child's drawing of a mountain range appeared upon the wall. Paul Hammond's back was turned, and he did not see one of the slender figures raise her hands to her mask.

A tingle went through the gathering. The test had come.

"I shall make no accusations," Hammond began. "Our enemy will point herself out. Two women are with us. One is Nevel Nason, of whom you have often heard. The other is Bette Langwell, known as the most dangerous woman in the world. Which is which? The picture of her voice will tell."

Masked faces turned to each other, and eyes looked into eyes. Only the slender figures directly in front of Paul Hammond were motionless. He stepped to the side of the woman seated on the left and took her hand.

"Will you please repeat the phrase spoken by the phonograph?" he asked.

The masked head bowed. Then a level voice sounded into the microphone. Again the stylus leaped back and forth, recording the waves the voice produced. The test finished, Paul Hammond took up the carbon-coated paper.

Tense stillness gripped the room as he turned to place the new picture beside the photograph of the voice which had spoken from the phonograph.

"The voice you have just heard," Hammond began, raising the newly made record, "was that of a woman who was known to me as Bette Langwell."

A murmur ran around the circle. Even at first glance, they could see that the voice was entirely different

from that which had issued from the phonograph.

"I take this occasion for apologizing to this lady for having had her arrested and held *incommunicado*," Hammond said, pausing before the woman who had spoken into the microphone. "I am sure she understands my reasons."

A hooded head nodded.

"And now"—Hammond turned to the second woman—"if you will speak into the microphone—" His hand touched the shoulder of the girl who was to face his strange test. There was no answer.

"Come," he said in a sterner voice. "You can't—"

His words stopped, and he lifted the mask. A mass of tawny curls appeared, and he saw the face of the woman he had known in San Francisco as Nevel Nason. Her features were motionless, her brown eyes covered by lowered lids.

Paul Hammond replaced the mask.

"The case is concluded," he told the assembled operatives. "It was one of a double theft of identity. When Bette Langwell posed as Nevel Nason, Miss Nason retaliated by posing as Bette Langwell. The real Miss Nason has demonstrated her innocence by taking the voice test. And the real Bette Langwell, known as the most dangerous woman in the world—" Hammond's voice sank to a whisper as he pointed to the dead body huddled in the chair—"is dangerous no longer."

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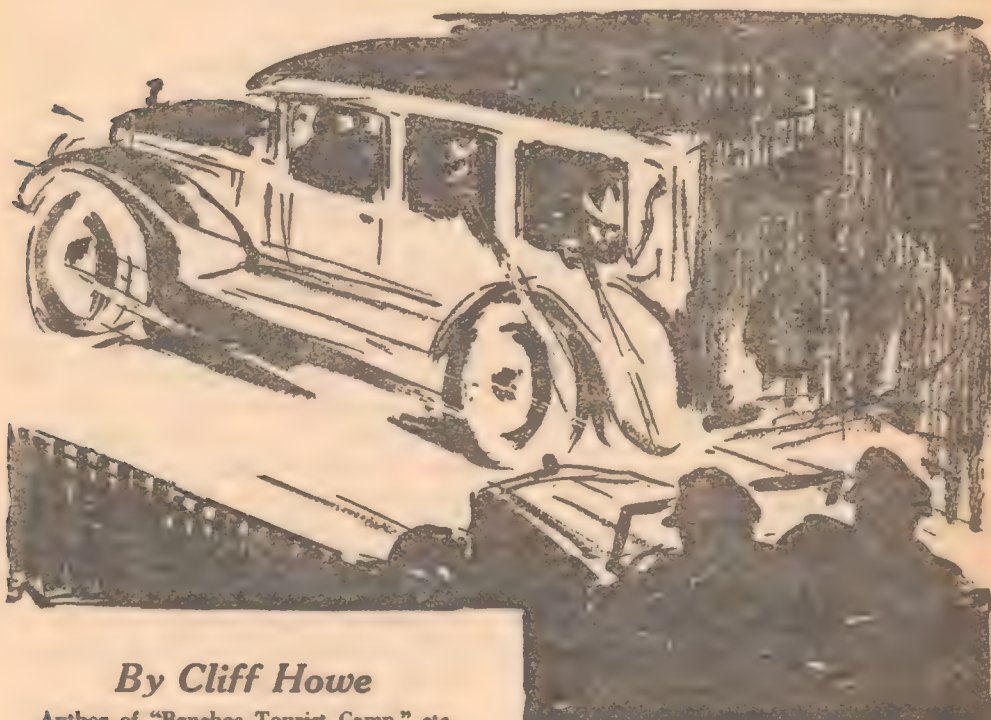
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PROBAK JUNIOR

They called him an office cop. Yet Captain Stone was willing to go out and use himself as a decoy for the Shotgun Gang—whose chieftain was a successful . . .

Hoarder of Death



By Cliff Howe

Author of "Banchee Tourist Camp," etc.



A RADIO car pulled up beside Traffic Officer Terence O'Keefe. The driver leaned out and grinned at the grizzled veteran.

"In between dodging cars, Terry, keep an eye out for the 'Shotgun Gang.' The bank down the street is red meat for those babies. Watch it as much as you can. Captain Blane's orders."

"Haven't I been watchin' it this past year?" O'Keefe demanded.

"What kind of a cop does that guy think I am?"

The radio in the patrol car whined for attention. The announcer's voice, crisp and vibrant, came out of the speaker.

"Cars sixty-two, forty-one, seventy-five and ninety, attention! Go to one-three-nine Lafayette Avenue. There's a shooting affair in the house. Step on it before some one gets murdered."

"That's us," the driver of the radio car announced. "We're off! See you later, Terry."

With siren screaming, the car darted away. O'Keefe sighed deeply, thinking of his younger days. He began to

direct traffic again. Remembering his orders, he glanced at the bank. There were cars parked at the entrance, but that was not unusual. The bank was a busy little place, even if it was far downtown.

A big sedan was coming slowly down the avenue toward O'Keefe. He lifted his big hand and held it there to allow cross street traffic to proceed. Suddenly O'Keefe stared at the bank in amazement. Men were backing out of it. Men who held sawed-off shotguns at a ready position. The burglar alarm began to clang its warning, and as if in a mocking answer, the roar of guns broke out.

O'Keefe slid his service revolver into the palm of his hand. He forgot all about the traffic. He leveled the gun, drew a bead on one of the gunmen and fired. The crook dropped his shotgun, spun around once and collapsed.

"I got that one," O'Keefe muttered. "Now let's see if there's another of them devils—"

That was O'Keefe's last thought. The sedan he had held up was beside him. A gun roared. O'Keefe pitched to the pavement. His world of seething traffic became a roaring maelstrom of sound. Louder it grew—and slower—until for him, it stopped.

O'Keefe was dead.

FIVE minutes later an ambulance rolled up. Following it was an official car, siren blasting its way through the stalled traffic. Deputy Commissioner Halliday climbed out. He was followed by a slim, well-knit figure in plain clothes.

"Never knew what hit him, commissioner." The ambulance surgeon stood up. "A sawed-off shotgun used at close range did the job."

"Thanks," Halliday said tonelessly. "Go over to the bank, doc. You may be able to help the other ambulance men. Some one has been hurt there too."

Grimly Halliday turned to his com-

panion. "I've known O'Keefe for many years," he said slowly. "He was one of the best."

"That he was." Captain Stone, the slender man in civilian clothes, knelt beside the dead man. "But look here! His service gun is underneath him. He fired one shot, commissioner, and O'Keefe was one of the best marksmen on the force. He wouldn't fire unless he knew his bullet would hit its mark."

"Then come over to the bank," Halliday said crisply. "If we could only find one member of this cursed Shotgun Gang, we'd get a lead on them. O'Keefe may have dropped some one. I hope it's Johnny Murtha. My men have a strong hunch he's the boss of that gang."

Gaping pedestrians opened a path for them. They walked into the bank and stopped in a moment of horror. Two men lay on the tiled floor. Both were obviously dead. A pale and shaking bank official hurried up to them.

"It was that Shotgun Gang." He licked his lips. "There must have been half a dozen of them. It all happened so—so quickly."

"The gang murdered those men, of course?" Stone queried.

"Yes! Both of them are employees—friends of mine. Sanderson, my cashier, stepped on the burglar alarm, and they shot him. Burrows was a teller. He pulled a gun, but he never used it."

"How much did they get?" Halliday asked.

"I don't know. We haven't had time to check up. But I don't care about the money. It's those men—they're dead. Can't you police do something about that gang? It's getting so people don't even want to walk into a bank."

Radio cars began to converge on the scene. Stone frowned as he turned to see them pull up. A uniformed sergeant leaped out of one car and raced inside. He saluted Stone.

"We were called away, sir, on a shooting affair on Lafayette Avenue.

The message from headquarters didn't reach us until just a moment ago."

"What happened on Lafayette Avenue?" Stone asked.

"A half-crazy guy shot up the ceilings all over the place. We had a hard time getting him without putting lead into his carcass. He's locked up by this time."

Stone's lips fastened in a firm, hard line and his eyes sparkled dangerously. Without a word he walked to the sidewalk in front of the bank. Glancing down he saw a smear of still moist blood. Halliday came out after him and Stone pointed to the stain.

"There's an example of O'Keefe's marksmanship," he said. "He hit one of those killers."

"Sure he did." An excited newsboy pushed his way closer. "He hit one of the guys good, he did. I saw him fall and his pals picked him up and threw him into their car."

"Thanks," Stone told the boy. "Give your name and address to that officer over there. You'll be helping us."

"Well, captain," Halliday turned to face Stone squarely, "It looks as though your radio cars were useless again. Odd how they happen to be busy whenever this gang strikes."

"Odd is a mild word for it," Stone said. "The only thing against my believing the Shotgun Gang didn't lure those cars away is the nature of the complaints. The calls were made by private citizens and every time they have been serious—like this shooting on Lafayette Avenue. I'd like to work on this case, commissioner."

"You?" Halliday showed his amazement. "Why, captain, you haven't worked outside in years. Every man in the detective department is at work on this gang."

"Just the same," Stone declared doggedly, "I'd like to work on it. After all, I'm head of the radio division and drawing those radio cars away like that is a reflection on me. I shouldn't have let it happen."

"Nonsense. How could you prevent it? As you say, each call has been a proper one. Oh, damn it, if that gang would only stick to one kind of hold-up! But they switch from one end of the city to another and they stick up everything from theatres to banks. This makes seven cold-blooded murders notched on the butts of their shotguns. Go ahead, captain. You've my permission to work on this. Act as you think best, with my detectives, or alone. You have my permission to use any means you see fit if only you can run down this murderous gang."

TWENTY-FOUR hours later, Radio Car Eighteen rolled slowly down the wide avenue. The man beside the driver wore a patrolman's uniform and badge, but there was a peculiar alertness in his eyes and the driver of the prowling car seemed a little more respectful than if his companion had been one of his own rank.

"It's quiet, captain," he observed. "Shall we stick around this area some more?"

"It's best," Stone said. "Cruise about. There's bound to be an alarm soon."

The radio squealed for attention.

"Cars eighteen, sixty-one, thirty-four and thirty-nine, proceed to seventy-four Foster Street. There's a murder been done there. Step on it!"

"Let's go," Stone snapped. "This is what I've been waiting for."

The car darted forward, siren screaming. Stone noted that the call came from a spot half a mile from the business section. Banks were closed, but movie houses were still open. If this was a ruse of the Shotgun Gang, it would be a movie house that was stuck up.

Stone was the first man to reach the address. An untidy and squint-eyed woman wiped her hands on a dirty apron.

"My," she observed, "you cops work fast. It's upstairs, officer. The

poor man checked in last night and now he's dead."

"Who shot him?" Stone demanded as he hurried in.

"Why, he shot himself. Leastwise I think he did. There wasn't a soul in the room with him."

"This report came in as being a murder." Stone faced her and watched the woman closely.

"Oh, them kids I sent to telephone just heard me say he was dead, and with their wild ideas I suppose they thought it was murder. Come along, officer. I'll show you where he is. And here come some more cops. Glory be, I never saw things happen so fast in all my life."

Half a dozen radio patrolmen were running up the steps. Stone stopped them at the door.

"You won't be needed, boys. The report came in wrong. It's suicide—not murder. Get back on your regular beats. One of you call headquarters from a call box and tell 'em to send the coroner."

Stone's car and driver waited in front of the house while the others sped away.

"Take me up," Stone ordered the woman.

He followed her up squeaking stairs to a dark hallway. She motioned toward a closed door.

"One of the boarders is in there with him, officer. I—I don't want to see the poor lad. He came in last night and paid me a week's rent in advance. He said he was goin' to look for a job today."

Stone left her talking. He walked into the room. A sharp-featured man rose hastily from a chair.

"Cripes," he snorted, "it's about time you guys showed up. I don't like being alone with a stiff like this."

Stone walked to the bed and looked down at the dead man. There was a bullet wound in the side of his head. The body was cold.

"He done it early last night," the roomer explained. "I thought I heard

a shot, but, hell, with all the cars backfirin' an' everythin', I didn't pay much attention. The old lady that runs this dump hollered when she went into the room, so I came in. I ain't touched nuthin'. Joe Welton's my name."

"It's suicide, all right," Stone commented. He saw a cheap nickel-plated revolver lying an inch from the hand of the body. "We'll have to wait for the coroner."

"Sure," the roomer agreed. "I got nuthin' to do. The poor guy couldn't take it, I guess. He was tellin' me last night he was broke."

Stone glanced about the cheaply furnished room. The shade over the single window was raised high. Directly opposite was another rooming house. Something glittered just a little from one of the windows. He turned back to the roomer, but his face betrayed nothing of what he had seen. Some one was watching him from the other house through binoculars, and Stone also had a momentary glimpse of polished steel. There was a rifle ready for action in that other house, too.

A siren howled dismally once. The roomer leaped to his feet.

"What's that?" he asked quickly.

Stone shrugged. "It's only the radio car I came in. The driver must have touched the siren accidentally. The coroner ought to be here pretty soon. We'll get this over right away."

But that wail had meant something far more important than that. Stone knew that a message had come over the radio that the Shotgun Gang had struck again. So far Stone's plans were working to perfection.

Heavy steps and the babbling of the landlady announced the arrival of the coroner. He hustled into the room, glanced at Stone and went to work. Stone led the roomer to the door.

"Better not stay here," he said. "It's not pleasant. Stick around outside."

The roomer left, but his steps

lagged as though he wanted to watch the gruesome scene on the bed. The landlady stood firmly in the doorway. "It's Potter's Field for the poor lad if he's broke, ain't it?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so," Stone replied.

"He was a nice-looking lad. You won't have to bother about him, officer. I'll pay for his funeral. He ain't got a friend in the world. He told me so last night. I know an undertaker who'll do the job cheap. That's all right, ain't it?"

"It's fine," Stone told her. "We won't have to take the body to the morgue. This is a clear case of suicide. You go ahead and call your undertaker. We'll be through in a few minutes."

Stone drew a notebook and pencil from his pocket. He began to write, knowing that spying eyes watched his every move. Stone stepped close to where the coroner worked. Idly his notebook sagged. He tapped it lightly with his pencil. The coroner looked at the page.

"Don't say anything," he read. "Some one is watching us with field glasses and he may be able to read lips."

The coroner glanced up into Stone's face. He bent over the body again so that anyone who watched could see only his broad back.

"I thought I recognized you, captain. This is murder, you know. This chap never shot himself and he wasn't killed in this room, either. There's no blood on the pillow to speak of and he's been dead for hours. How shall I report it?"

"You can tell me it's suicide when you finish," Stone kept his back to the window and he spoke very low. "Say it loudly so that any one who listens can hear. Hold up your report temporarily."

The coroner straightened up and began to replace his instruments. He picked up his bag and started for the door.

"It's suicide all right, officer," he

said in a voice that could be heard outside the room. "There's no use in making a post mortem."

Stone held the door open for him. The landlady and the roomer were half a dozen feet away.

"This lady has promised to finance the funeral," Stone told the doctor. "I'll report back to headquarters and we'll close the case."

SOLEMNLy Stone took down the name of the landlady and the roomer and noted also the name that the dead man had given the woman. He closed his notebook and headed for the front door.

"That's all there is to it," he said. "It's mighty white of you to bury him. That will save the city trouble and expense. Thanks."

He hurried down to the radio car, got in and was driven off.

"Turn the next corner—quick," he directed and while the radio car pulled to a stop on a quiet street, Stone began peeling off his uniform. Underneath, decidedly wrinkled, he wore a civilian suit. A soft, wrinkle-proof hat was pulled down over his eyes. He got out of the car.

"Go back to headquarters and tell Commissioner Halliday to have that truck ready. I'll phone as to where it must be left. Beat it, now, before some of those crooks show up and wonder what you're stalled here for."

Stone watched the radio car pull away. He walked around the corner and slowly ambled by the house in which a dead man lay. As he passed it, the door opened and Welton ran down the steps. He walked briskly by Stone and paid him not the slightest attention.

Skillfully Stone took up the chase. The roomer led him an easy trail. He entered a drug store and went directly to a phone booth. Stone squeezed into the adjoining one and made a pretense of phoning. He could hear, faintly, the words of the other man.

"This is Welton. Yeah, everything

is okay. Sure—we even fixed it so the body don't go to the morgue. Were the cops stalled long enough? My gosh, are they dumb! . . . Yeah? Okay, I'll be right over."

He hung up, walked out of the booth and glanced suspiciously at Stone, but a uniform and drab civilian clothes make a world of difference in the appearance of a man. Welton didn't recognize the dumb cop who had fallen for his little play.

He hailed a taxi and was driven north. Stone followed in another cab. Welton got out far uptown, hurried across the street and strode confidently into a tobacco store.

Stone surveyed the neighborhood. The place into which Welton had vanished wasn't prepossessing. Directly behind it towered an old, abandoned factory. He glanced at his watch. Ten minutes of eight. Nine-thirty, he knew, was the deadline for theatre holdups. Usually the box offices were closed soon after that hour. If the Shotgun mob was planning another holdup, it would happen soon.

Stone walked into a store half a block down the street. He entered a phone booth and called headquarters.

"Stone, commissioner," he said when the connection was completed. "Have that truck parked at the curb on Weymouth Street just around the corner from Logan Avenue. Get it there as quickly as possible. No, I don't need help yet, but expect to hear from me any time."

He hung up, slid his service revolver out of its holster and made certain it was ready for action. He walked back to the store into which Welton had vanished. He went in, stepped up to the cigar counter and debated over a purchase.

"I'm ready to close up, mister," the proprietor said. "What'll it be?"

Stone looked up and into a cruel, scarred face that betrayed open suspicion.

"Never mind the smokes," Stone said. "I saw a guy named Welton

walk in here a couple of minutes ago. I waited for him to come out, but he hasn't showed up. That guy owes me a hundred bucks. Where'd he go?"

"Get outta here," the proprietor leaned over the counter. "Nobody came in here and this ain't no collection agency. Beat it!"

Stone shrugged. He made as if to turn away, but instead his two hands shot out. He grabbed the proprietor by the throat and yanked him half-way across the counter. Muffled cries came from the bigger man, but Stone's hands throttled him. He drew back his fist, aimed the blow and sent it home to the chin. The proprietor went limp.

There was no time to tie him up. Stone eased him gently behind the counter. He drew his gun and went carefully into the back room. It was dusty and barren. To his left he spotted the ring handle of a trapdoor. Gently he raised it and, using his flashlight, he saw a dozen steps leading downward. The earthy smell of an underground tunnel greeted him. Grimly Stone went down the steps, making little noise.

THE passage was small and he had to double himself up in order to creep along. It curved, and when he passed around the bend, he could see a closed door. Every nerve tensed and ready, he crawled to the door and pressed his ear against the panel. There were voices within and they came plainly to him.

"Are you sure you wasn't trailed, Welton?" some one asked.

"Naw! I was careful, and those dumb cops wouldn't think of tailing me, anyway. Say, the old dame at the boarding house wants five hundred bucks above the funeral expenses. We better give it to her quick before she opens her lip."

"If she does, she'll taste the insides of a shotgun," the first voice promised. "But five hundred is cheap."

"Sure it is," Welton agreed. "We

got rid of the body. They didn't even fingerprint him. That's a damn sight better than just heaving the stiff outta the car and havin' him checked for a record. I gotta admit, chief, that you got brains. How did the job turn out? Did I hold the cops long enough?"

"Yeah. We cracked a jewelry store for ten grand. Let's get started on to-night's job."

Stone became aware of voices behind him. The proprietor of the tobacco store and one other man were hurrying through the passage.

"I tell you that guy came down here. He knocked me cold, but I can take it. I woke up and I heard the trapdoor close in the back room."

The door ahead of Stone flew open. Welton and four other men peered through it. Each was armed with a sawed-off shotgun.

One of the men coming through the tunnel saw him. A gun cracked and dirt showered down Stone's collar. He snapped a single shot and saw the gunman go down. The store owner ducked toward the ground. He lifted his gun and called a warning.

"Look out, chief. I'm gonna mow this rat down. He trailed Welton in here."

"You fool!" the leader of the mob whirled on Welton and smashed him with the stock of his gun. Welton collapsed. Stone fired. The store owner screamed in agony and fell flat. Like a flash Stone made a dive back over the route along which he had come. Behind him a shotgun blasted. Stone threw himself flat on the ground. It was hopeless. In a tunnel of this size a shotgun didn't even have to be aimed. Its spray of shot was bound to hit somewhere.

"Stand up, you lousy stool pigeon," the leader's rasping voice ordered. "Stand up or we'll blow you apart."

Slowly Stone arose and lifted his arms. While he lived, there was hope; and he wouldn't live long if he disobeyed.

"Turn around and walk back here,"

came the command and Stone followed it. He stepped into the small room in the cellar of the old factory. Instantly he recognized the leader of the mob.

"Hello, Murtha," he smiled a little.

"Who the hell are you?" Murtha demanded and Stone could see his trigger finger whiten.

"Hey!" One of the other crooks pressed forward eagerly. "I know this guy. It's that cop who was talkin' to Welton in the room with Tony, the dead guy. I watched him with field glasses and I know his mug."

"A wise cop, huh?" Murtha grimaced. "How'd you get wise to this joint?"

Stone shrugged. "I saw Welton walk in here and I thought I'd ask him if the dead roomer had been buried."

"You're a liar," Murtha snarled. "You tailed him here. Okay, flatfoot, I'm glad you showed up. I can use you in my business."

He turned to his men. "Tie this rat up and carry him to the top of this joint. Tie him to a chair near a window. Don't gag him. We'll set this dump on fire and let him yell for help. They'll never save him, but he'll draw every prowl car for a mile around to this place. We're gonna crack the Ambassador Theatre. There's about twenty grand in the safe now. Hurry up, boys, there ain't much time to lose, and I wanta hear this guy yell, anyway."

Stone struggled futilely in the grip of his captors. Some one slammed the barrel of a shotgun over his head. He wilted, half conscious. Swept off his feet, he was carried up four flights of stairs. A heavy chair was dragged to an open window and he was dropped into it. Ropes lashed him to the chair while Murtha stood aside and laughed.

"This is the best job yet," he gloated. "Wait until the flames start roasting you, flatfoot. Then holler like hell so all your pals will try to save you. But they won't. This whole floor is gonna be covered with gasoline. If any

of the fools try to get up here, they'll roast along with you. Sprinkle the gas, boys. We've got to get going."

Before they had all departed from the room, Stone was straining at his bonds. He rocked the chair and fell over with it. Grimly, he pushed himself across the floor. It was a mass of flames, and the fire was greedily closing in on him. Smoke poured out of the windows in which the glass had long since been broken. Stone heard shouts. The fire had been seen. With a blaze such as this would eventually be, almost all radio cars would be called to it. The Shotgun Gang would have an easy time at the theatre.

"I must get out of here," Stone groaned. "I've got to."

He was nearing the door. A sheet of flame swept over him, but he could do nothing except keep on pushing himself and the chair toward the door.

He reached it. The room behind him was a raging inferno. Beams were already beginning to sag and crackle. Ten feet before him Stone saw the straight and steep flight of stairs. If he could only get to those steps!

He set his teeth and went on. His hair was singed and there were seared marks on the flesh of his hands, but a desperate courage showed in the outward thrust of his jaw.

HE reached the top of the stairs. For a moment he teetered on the edge. It looked like almost certain death to let himself fall down them, but that was better than burning to a crisp on the upper floor. Stone let himself go.

The chair struck the first step and shattered. Mingled with the wreckage Stone went hurtling down the steps. Dazed and shaken, he picked himself up at the bottom. He shook off the now loosened ropes, flexed circulation back into his arms and legs and raced down the remaining steps to the first floor. A crowd had already gathered. He plunged through it and ran with all the speed he could muster toward

Weymouth Street. Would the truck be there? Stone hardly dared think about it.

He darted around the corner, saw the closed truck and headed for it. He climbed into the cab, opened the panel behind the seat and squirmed into the back of the truck. Before him was a small table upon which were set a series of radio tubes and coils. Stone threw a switch, and a small dynamo began to hum. He twisted dials, picked up a microphone and began to speak.

"All cars attention. All cars. Captain Stone speaking. Special orders. Disregard the fire alarm on Logan Avenue. Cars sixty-one, seventy and thirty-four, block the north end of Camden Street. Cars thirty-five, twenty-nine and sixty-seven, take care of the south end. Cars fifty-five and six, proceed toward the Ambassador Theatre on cross streets. Cars sixteen and twenty, drive due east. Other cars converge on the theatre. The Shotgun Gang is holding it up. They are well armed. Take no chances!"

"Drop that mike and stick 'em up," a harsh voice rasped from the front seat of the truck.

Stone turned his head slowly and looked into the yawning muzzle of a sawed-off shotgun. Welton's leering face was behind it. Another man was at the wheel.

"Thought you were wise, didn't you?" he snarled. "Well we're a damned sight smarter than any cop. We stayed behind in the crowd just to be sure you didn't get away."

Stone said nothing. He still clung to the microphone, but he knew only too well that the instant he raised it, his head would be blown off his shoulders.

"Take the wheel of this bus, Mike," Welton ordered. "Drive like hell to Camden Street and get as close as you can to the theatre. Maybe those cops have Murtha and the boys blocked, but they won't stop 'em when they leave. Not unless they want to find their dear Captain Stone lookin' like

a seventy-five hit him between the eyes. Keep that mike down, you. Just give one peep and you get it."

Without lowering the gun an inch Welton squirmed into the back of the truck.

"Back up against the side of this bus," he ordered Stone. "Gimme that mike. I'm gonna tell the cops somethin' that'll make their eyes blink."

"Do you think that will save your murdering sidekicks?" Stone demanded. "Go ahead and shoot like the louse you are. You won't get away, and if I die from the blast of a shotgun, you'll be dragged down a corridor to an electric chair if you live that long."

Welton paled, but he snarled a string of oaths. He lifted the microphone.

"Is this thing all set to talk into?" he asked. "Get it going, because it's your only chance for life, copper."

"I'll have to change the wave length," Stone said quietly. "We're getting nearer to where the cars are gathering. The sound will be distorted."

"Then change it," the crook snapped. "And be quick about it."

HE still held the microphone near his lips. Stone twirled a dial, set the amplifier at its highest frequency and backed up a pace to lift his hands under the threat of that grim shotgun.

"I tell you it's impossible for you to get away with this," he said loudly.

"Impossible, hell!" Welton averted his face from the microphone. "You're here, ain't you? I got you covered. We're gonna park four blocks from where the fireworks are gonna start, and if anythin' breaks, we can beat it. But you won't come with us, Stone. We'll leave what's left of you right here in this phony truck."

Stone wilted a little. "You're going to drive south on Camden Street?" he asked. "And park four blocks from the theatre? Hell, man, if there was an ambush of police, they could mow down your driver and kill you, too."

"Yeah, but there ain't gonna be no ambush. The cops don't even know we're comin'. Soon as we get there, I'll tell 'em somethin' over this radio."

The truck slowed, swerved a little and stopped. The driver turned his head.

"We're here—and what an army of cops ahead of us. They've closed in on Murtha and the boys."

"Watch this guy," the crook ordered. "I'm gonna go on the air."

The driver raised a shotgun and rested it on the back of the seat. The other crook laid his weapon down, picked up the mike in both hands and held it close to his lips. He began to talk.

"Listen, all you guys in radio cars. We got Captain Stone as our prisoner. Either you let that mob walk outta that theatre lobby or Stone gets blown apart. Every damned radio and riot car has gotta pull away and give 'em room to scam. You got two minutes to do it or Stone gets his."

"They won't believe you." Stone was perspiring freely. "They'll think you're bluffing."

"Oh, yeah?" the crook snarled. "Well, you step up to this mike an' tell 'em I'm not fooling."

Stone bent his head close to the microphone.

"It's true," he said bitterly. "I'm helpless. There's one man in back of the truck with me and one other with a shotgun sitting in the front seat."

"Wham!"

A single shot crashed through the glass window next to the driver. His head jerked aside as if struck by a mighty invisible fist. At the same time Stone lifted a fist from the floor. It connected with Welton's jaw and sent him reeling backward. He reached for his shotgun. Stone kicked it away. He twisted a dial before he leaped for him. In the narrow confines of the truck, the struggle was brief. Stone was a hard and quick hitter. Once he took a smashing fist full in the face,

but he shook off its dazing effect and slammed home blow after blow.

"Get up," he ordered. "Lift your hands and keep them there."

Some one climbed into the cab of the truck. "Are you all right, captain?" It was a patrolman with a rifle gripped in his hand.

"Right enough," Stone answered. "Keep this man quiet while I use this radio again."

Swiftly Stone adjusted the dials and picked up the microphone.

"Captain Stone calling," he spoke distinctly. "I am no longer in any danger. Those crooks in that theatre lobby must have heard their pal giving his orders over the radio. They can't hear me talking now. Begin pulling away as though you were following out his orders. Let them start away from the theatre and then close in on them from every side. They know you won't fire while they are in that lobby. Too many people in there with them."

THE radio and riot cars began to back away, leaving an opening through which the gang could make their escape. Stone, peering through a small glass window in the back door of the truck, watched it all, microphone in hand. The crooks emerged from the theatre lobby slowly, guns ready. They were sure of themselves.

"Now," he spoke into the microphone. "Puncture every tire. Fill the gas tank full of holes. Stop them. They won't fight once they see it's hopeless."

Guns barked grim messages. All three bandit cars swerved over the road. Vainly the drivers tried to right them. Guns protruded from each car. Stone raised the amplification of the radio and spoke again.

"Drop those guns. This is Captain Stone speaking. I'm not a prisoner any longer. If your men fire a single shot, Murtha, they'll be blown off the earth. Come out of those cars with your hands up."

The men in the last car emerged, hands stretched high above their heads. Murtha was in the first car. A shotgun barked. Instantly the din of a hundred guns split the air. The first car was riddled with lead.

Men crawled from it, bleeding and helpless. Only one man stayed behind. It was Murtha. He was dead.

Stone opened the back door of the truck and leaped out. Commissioner Halliday ran up to him.

"Fine work, captain," he said, "fine work. But for a moment I thought they had us. At first we thought you had gone crazy. But we soon got the trend of your conversation. How in the world did you do it?"

"I was on a pretty spot," Stone confessed, "until that thug told me to tune him in. I turned on every ounce of power this set had, and every whisper he made went out over the air like a blast of thunder. I knew you'd get wise and ambush this truck. You got the driver just in time."

"And I said you were an office cop," Halliday berated himself. "You've done what all my detectives couldn't do. We've got the entire gang, thanks to you."

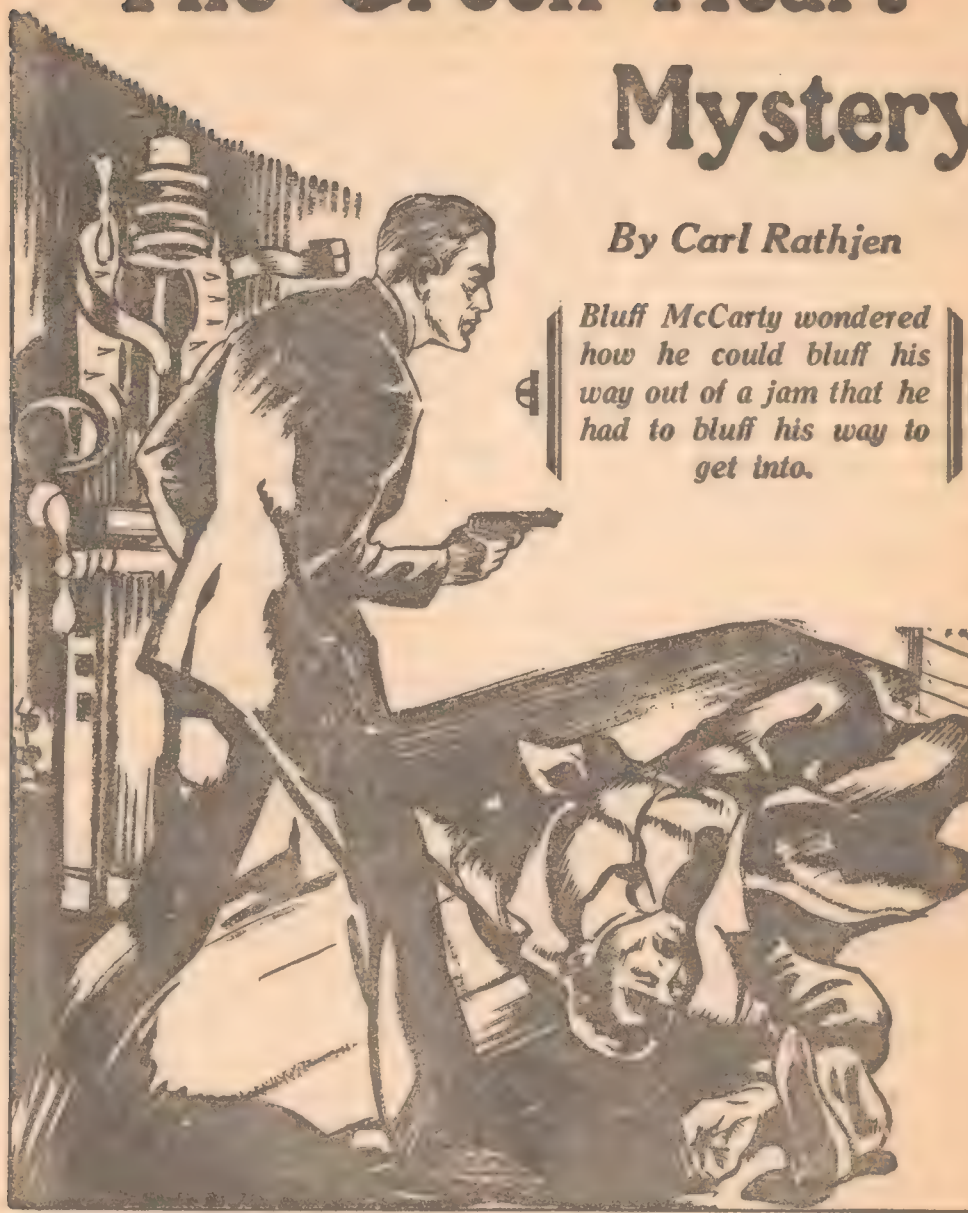
Stone mopped his brow. "Maybe I am an office cop, but hell, there's still a thrill left in life. I've found that out. Now shoot a car up to Foster Street and pick up the landlady there. She's one of this mob. The crook O'Keefe shot through the head was brought to her rooming house and left there, presumably a suicide. I was sure they couldn't get rid of the body quickly and they might pull some stunt like that. They used every means they could think of to draw radio cars away from certain areas when they were ready to strike, so I figured they might use this body of their own pal to do the same thing.

"We must get one of these portable radio transmitters," he went on. "I borrowed this one from the state police. It's got some volume."

The Green Heart Mystery

By Carl Rathjen

Bluff McCarty wondered how he could bluff his way out of a jam that he had to bluff his way to get into.



I ANSWERED the phone and the evening operator downstairs in the lobby of the Hotel Empire spoke to me.

"Mr. McCarty, there's a call for you. Do you want me to trace it as you directed?"

"Yes, put them on," I said. There was a click.

"Hello?" a man's voice inquired impatiently.

"Bluff McCarty speaking," I said. "Who's calling, please?"

"That ain't important," the voice evaded. "Listen, are you the same McCarty who said he knew what the mur—deaths of them two doctors was about?"

I'd noticed the slip but I didn't mention it. "There's only one Bluff McCarty," I replied.

"Okay then," the voice remarked. "I got a hot tip for you."

"Fine," I said. "Let's have it."

"Okay. The guy you're looking for is just now parking his car across the street from your hotel. If you look out your window you can spot his car. It's a blue sedan." Click, and the man hung up.

The operator's voice spoke almost immediately. She was apologetic. "I'm sorry, he didn't speak long enough for me to trace—"

"It's all right, sister," I remarked. "It was probably from a pay station anyway." I hung up and stood up. The window was just a few paces away, but I didn't move toward it—yet. My coat was lying across the bed. Reaching in the closet, I got a hanger and slipped it inside the coat. I placed my hat over the hook of the hanger and looked at the effect.

"Sloppy," I muttered. "Doesn't look like me at all. But it might work."

Grasping the hanger through one shoulder of the coat, I extended my arm and paced forward, moving the coat and hat toward the window, but keeping out of line myself. The noise of the New York night traffic clamored up from the street five floors below. Something tugged at the coat. I released my grip and let the whole business drop. It collapsed in a heap below the window, and I stared down at it. There was a neat little hole in the part of the fabric that ordinarily covered my shoulder blades.

I shrugged. Tough on a swell coat, but easier on me. Good thing I'd been alert enough to notice earlier this evening that there was no parking across from the hotel. There was a mounted cop there shooing cars away.

I looked at the hole in the coat again. I was very thankful for it. It showed me that I had a hole, a loop-hole to crawl through.

YOU see, along about five o'clock I bluffed myself into a situation that put me on the spot, figuratively and literally. Don't get me wrong. I knew what I was doing.

It started, my part of it anyway, just east of Fifth Avenue on Forty-third in the Toppers Club, the snootiest club of its kind in New York. Membership in the Toppers is honorary and given only to those who are tops in their field. You have to have at least nation-wide recognition before you can even be brought in as a guest; and that doesn't mean you're eligible for membership, not by a long shot. I suppose you're wondering what I was doing there then, how I got in. Well, I'm Bluff McCarty.

I strolled into the lounge room just off the bar and there I saw the four men in animated discussion. There was Lawson Reade, ace news commentator and adventurer. There was Cyril Tollam, builder of the Tollam motor cars. Tollam was young for his position. He was about forty, and had just returned from the Utah salt flats where he'd established a new land speed record of 325 miles per hour.

The other two men in the group were Doc Meady, world-famed New York Medical Examiner, and a Doctor Kittring, whose crime laboratory at Mid-Western University was the model for similar laboratories the world over.

I heard Meady, the M. E., say: "Everything points to suicide in the cases of Hardwicke and Plunkett. I'm convinced it was suicide. But why? Especially in the case of Hardwicke. Everyone who knew him agrees with me. For instance, Doctor Jollard who was at the funeral services last night, and—"

I started toward the group as Kittring, the criminologist, nodded and said: "I was given the courtesy of going over each doctor's office, and there was no evidence of murder."

"Just a coincidence I'd say," remarked Tollam, the speed king.

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Reade, the commentator, was about to speak when he and the others became aware of me.

"Good evening, gentlemen," I greeted them. "Do you mind if I join you? I am most interested in the cases you are discussing, the deaths of the X-ray doctors."

They all frowned at me and sought to place me.

"I'm Barry McCarty," I announced, "better known as Bluff McCarty."

"McCarty?" Tollam repeated doubtfully. There was a trace of suspicion in his tone, and there was suspicion in the eyes of Meady and Kittring. But Lawson Reade just stared at me with a slight smile about his lips, and his twinkling eyes studied me from my feet to my bluff, upstanding red hair.

I knew he was wise to me, but all he said was: "I've heard of you, Bluff McCarty. I'm glad to meet you," he said, extending his hand. He had a good hard grip. I liked him.

But such was not the case with the others, least of all with Tollam.

"McCarty?" he repeated for the second time. "I'm on the membership committee and I don't recall—"

"Perhaps," I smiled, "after the way you streaked across the salt flats, your memory hasn't had a chance to catch up with you yet."

Reade chuckled, and the other two looked as though they might be ready to change their opinions about me. But what I said next kept me behind the eight ball as far as they were concerned.

"I notice you were discussing the recent *murders* of Doctors Hardwicke and—"

"Murders?" the medical examiner and the criminologist chorused. Tollam looked scornfully at me, and Reade's eyebrows went up slightly.

"Sure, murders," I said. "What other explanation is there for the deaths?"

WELL, without going through the verbal tug of war we had, the gist of the affair was this. Two days ago, along about five-thirty in the afternoon, a Dr. Hardwicke, who had an office on the sixth floor of a building on East Forty-sixth Street, either jumped or fell to the street below and was instantly killed. It was after office hours, and the nurse had gone home. The elevator men could remember taking no one up to his floor. The office was in order, and there was nothing that would suggest murder, or suicide for that matter. Hardwicke had everything to live for. So the death was described by the papers and everyone as accidental.

Then, last night, about eight o'clock, Harlan Plunkett, another X-ray and diagnostic specialist, died under similar circumstances. He either fell or jumped to his death. Again no suggestion of murder, no motive for suicide.

"It must be murder," I insisted, facing the four men in the Toppers Club. "The circumstances are too similar for coincidence. Both men are X-ray specialists. Neither of them had apparent suicide motives. Yet you men, their supposed friends, are willing to let the stigma of suicide hang over their names."

"Murder is out," snapped Kittring, the criminologist. "I went over those offices thoroughly. If there had been anything there I'd have found it."

"It's still murder," I maintained doggedly. Reade, the commentator, was watching me but saying nothing. Tollam kept scowling at me. He'd ordered a drink once during the discussion, and I'd seen him whisper something to the steward. When the steward brought the drink he handed Tollam a book, which Tollam thumbed through casually as I tugged pro and con with Meady and Kittring. Now Tollam snapped the book closed and leaned toward me.

"You're not a member of this club," he accused. "You've never even been

on the guest list. Who are you?"

"I'm Bluff McCarty," I replied, and facing the huffy M. E., I filed his feelings some more by saying: "I'll bet some day that your reports are proved erroneous, that those deaths were not accidental."

"Tell me something," he said acidly. "Just why are you so sure? What do you know about these—er—deaths?"

"That's why I'd like to know, too," challenged Tollam truculently. He spoke to the criminologist without taking his eyes off me. "Doctor, isn't it a fact that some crim—some people of certain natures, when they feel that something they have done is not receiving enough attention—that they boast and talk vaguely about—"

Reade cut him off angrily. "That's a hell of an accusation to make, Cyril," he charged.

I smiled at Reade. "But justified perhaps," I said, "considering the circumstances of my presence here. However, I killed neither of the two men we have been discussing. I just arrived from London this noon and have spent the afternoon reading the back issues of the newspapers. Shall I have the steward bring a phone so that you can check with the steamship office?"

Reade scowled at Tollam and shook his head. And Tollam said: "And just from what you've read in the papers you think—"

"I don't think," I corrected. "I'm positive, even though I know no more about the cases than any of you—gentlemen here. In fact," I suggested, after a brief pause, "I'm inclined to think I can prove the deaths were murder."

Meady and Kittring looked skeptical. Tollam noted this and reacted just as I thought he would.

"Care to bet on that?" he challenged. "Say about five thousand?"

"It's a bet," I agreed quickly. "These gentlemen are witnesses to our pact, I presume. Therefore, since we are gathered in honorable sur-

roundings, it won't be necessary to post our wagers."

"You're not a member here," Tollam began.

"For pity's sake, Cyril," growled Reade. "I'll vouch for McCarty."

TOLLAM frowned and looked a bit apprehensive. It was just dawning on him how quickly I had snapped up his offer.

"How do you propose to prove your contentions?" he inquired uneasily.

"My name's Bluff McCarty," I replied. "Accent on the first name."

"You mean," he stammered incredulously, "you think you can bluff the supposed murderer into exposing himself?"

"Why not?" I rejoined.

He was obviously relieved about my acceptance of the bet.

"You're crazy," he suggested, and looked at me sharply. "You weren't by any chance bluffing about accepting—"

"The bet is still on," I assured him. I looked at each of them in turn. "And now, gentlemen, there are one or two conditions I must ask each of you to—"

"Nothing doing," exploded Tollam. "You made the wager without any conditions, you can't start in now to—"

Reade interrupted him. "I think it only fair that we should—"

"No," snapped Tollam, and Meady and Kittring nodded in agreement as they eyed me balefully.

I shook my head at Reade. "Don't bother arguing," I advised him. "I'll accept matters as they are, and," I added, turning to the others, "I'll expect you gentlemen to be equally good sports."

They smiled smugly. I beckoned to a steward and asked him to bring me a telephone. One by one I called each of the newspapers, gave them my name and address, and stated that I had information concerning the deaths of Doctors Hardwicke and Plunkett which Doc Meady, repre-

senting the police, refused to listen to or consider. The same applied to Doctor Kittring.

The M. E. and Kittring attempted to protest and make me retract, but Reade intervened. He pointed out that since they had refused to listen to my conditions they should at least be good sports as I had suggested. Tolam, however, was jubilant. He assured me that now not only would I lose the wager, but would also make myself the laughing stock of the town and perhaps be subjected to slander suits from the families of the dead doctors.

Shortly, reporters appeared at the club to verify my statements. An injured attitude, such as I took, can cover a great deal of emptiness, or shall I say ignorance. Or more concretely, my obvious pique at the attitude of the "police" had closed me like a clam, and I refused to reveal anything. But I hinted at much, even that I might attempt to seek justice for the deaths of the doctors.

The evening sports editions carried the story, carefully worded to avoid libel suits, but nevertheless with clear meaning. And Reade, naturally, was forced to comment upon it during his early evening broadcast, though I think he rather welcomed the opportunity to assist me.

So here I was, staring down at a bullet hole in my coat. My bluff had worked. I'd flushed my quarry, even though he, or they as it appeared to be, had taken cover again before I could see them. At least I knew to my own satisfaction that my bluff was not just idle boasting for publicity purposes. Now to entice my quarry closer.

But before I could take action, action came to me. There was a knock at the door. I thought of the coat trick again, but it would be carrying it too far, even for Bluff McCarty, to expect that to work twice in the same evening. Besides, I figured whoever was out there could not be the same person who had attempted to take

my life. Only a miracle man could get from the garage roof across the street to my room on the fifth floor in a matter of seconds. Still there was the possibility that the person who had knocked was linked with the murderer. I decided to continue with my faith in my bluffing abilities.

It wasn't necessary, however, as I soon learned when I opened the door. A man, a thin nervous man, stepped in quickly, pushing me back. He turned to peer out through the crack of the door before he closed it.

"Guess I ditched them," he sighed. "Got anything to drink?"

"A M I to expect more company?" I inquired. "How many shall I order for?" I went to my grip and poured him a stiff one, for he obviously needed it. He downed it at a gulp.

"Listen," he gasped, "are you on the level? I mean, are you hot on to something about them docs?"

I glanced at my coat on the floor. "I am kind of hot, you might say," I remarked.

His pale-blue eyes studied me intently a moment before he spoke again. "Is it true you ain't workin' with the cops?" he demanded.

I motioned to the pile of newspapers. "You've read the papers, I presume. They all agree on something for once," I said.

"I don't believe what I read in the papers," he snapped. "Are you workin' with the cops?"

I reached toward the telephone. "Perhaps you'd like to hear from the police commissioner. He and I had verbal fisticuffs shortly after the sports editions were out."

"Skip it," he growled. "I don't want the cops in on this."

"So I gathered."

There was one of those sparring silences during which we regarded each other like two cats on a back fence.

"Well?" we prompted together.

I smiled. "After you, Gaston," I said.

He scowled. "What do you know about the deaths of them two—" He saw me shake my head. "All right," he grumbled, "I'll speak, but I'm taking your word for it you won't spill this to the cops, okay?" He leaned forward and spoke softly, but intensely.

His name, he said, was Charley Gammer, and briefly, his story, after sorting his jigsawed statements and placing them in their proper positions, was this. Two months ago, while taking a noon-hour stroll, he'd been wounded in the abdomen when he got in the line of fire from an escaped criminal seeking to avoid capture by a detective. He slurred over that as unimportant, his real trouble came later.

He experienced dull heavy pains in his abdomen after he was supposed to be healed, and becoming dissatisfied with the lack of aid from his physician he had gone to a Dr. Hardwicke, an X-ray specialist. Ten minutes after he left the doctor's office, Hardwicke either jumped or fell from his office window. So the next evening, after work, Gammer went to Doctor Plunkett.

"And the same thing occurred to Doctor Plunkett," I suggested.

Gammer nodded and watched me anxiously.

"Yeah, he splattered on the pavement, too," Gammer said. "I can't go to the cops and tell them this. They'll book me on suspicion as sure as I'm here."

"Obviously," I remarked. "You were the last person to see the doctors alive."

Gammer's face went white. "You don't believe that," he said hoarsely. "It must be the guys who are following me. I first noticed I was being followed on my way to work this morning. I've been followed all day. What do you make of it?"

"What do you know about them deaths? Am I in the clear? Should I—

I go to the cops and tell them? Do you think the cops are tailin' me?"

"No," I said, and meant it. "If they knew about you, they'd have enough to grill you. They'd pick you up." I stood up. "You'd better leave now. For your own safety you'd better not be seen with me." I motioned to the coat and his eyes widened. "By the way," I inquired, "who is your doctor? I mean the one you thought was not helping you. Has anything happened to him?"

"No," he muttered. "But—"

The phone rang then. It was the operator. "Two men just asked for your room number," she informed me.

"Send them up," I said.

"They've already started," she replied.

Gammer moved quickly toward the door. "Expectin' some one? I'd better leave."

"Wait," I called as he hurried out the door. "What's the name of your—"

BUT HE was running down the hall. He just about made it around the corner before the elevator doors clanged in the opposite direction. Two men strode down the hallway. I stepped back in the room and quickly took a small automatic from my grip and placed it in my side pocket.

I had my hands in my pockets and so did the men when they entered.

"Chilly, isn't it?" I remarked. "Too bad all of us forgot our gloves." I knew both of them by sight. They had been palsy-walsies of a gem thief, Paul Keller, whom I'd heard was dead.

"Hello, Matt," I greeted the taller man, Matt Stellman. I turned to his partner, the man with limp-looking ears that sagged. "Hello, Droopy." But all Droopy Donlan did was scowl.

"How do you know us?" he grumbled.

"Skip it, he does," said Stellman. He grinned at my concealed hands.

"You've got only one rod, in your right pocket," he guessed. "Each of us has two. But we don't want to use them."

I nodded toward the coat without taking my eyes off them.

Droopy scowled. "We wouldn't know about that," he said.

The odds were against me and we weren't getting anywhere, so I took my hands from my pockets.

"That's really sensible," declared Stellman. He made no attempt to take my gun, but moved quickly about the room and looked in the closet and lavatory and shifted the bureau from the wall.

"There's no dictaphone," I assured him. "You can believe what you saw in the paper, that I'm not working with the police."

He smiled. "You've no objection, have you, if I satisfy myself?"

I glanced at alert Droopy Donlan.

"I have no objections."

Satisfied, Stellman faced me. "Okay, what do you know?" he demanded.

"Yeah," frowned Droopy. "Spill it."

"Reports have it," I stated, "that Doctors Hardwicke and Plunkett either fell or jumped from their windows, though I'm inclined to believe they were pushed."

"We wouldn't know about that," Droopy cut in.

"Go on," prompted Stellman.

I shrugged. "That's as far as I've learned," I admitted. Sometimes the truth accomplishes more than lying in situations like this.

Droopy leered at me. "Cover him," he said to Stellman, "while I light a cigarette and take his shoes off."

"Forget that," growled Stellman. "He's so cool he'd put the cigarette out. Listen, McCarty, you look like a right guy. We'll make a deal with you. We'll put our cards on the table."

"I'd like it better," I said, "if you'd put your hands on the table."

Stellman stared at me, then looked

at Droopy and nodded. They took their hands from their pockets.

"Two months ago," began Stellman, "Keller, a guy we had a nodding acquaintance with, heisted a small green heart, made of emeralds, from an ice shop on Madison Avenue. Coming out, he ran smack into a dick who was stubborn and got killed."

"We—" began Droopy.

"I know," I smiled. "You wouldn't know about that."

"Keller," informed Stellman, "got lead poisoning bad before the dick went out. Traffic bulls were closing in, so he ducked into a private hospital and hid there till he took his final powder about ten minutes later. The bulls didn't find the green heart on his body. Now, here's the deal we'll make with you."

"It's this, isn't it?" I suggested. "You know something about the deaths of the two doctors, and you'll tell me what it is in exchange for information about the green heart."

"How did you know?" demanded Stellman.

"Oh, I'm good at that sort of thing," I replied.

"Well, make it good then," snarled Droopy, "and spill."

"Tell me," I evaded, "why come to me for information? Why not go to the people you suspect? The staff of the small hospital, for instance; the patients who were there at the time Keller blew in?"

"Because we're saving ourselves a lot of trouble," replied Stellman.

"Why have you delayed so long?" I probed. "Or did you strike blind alleys when you interrogated Hardwicke and—"

"We wouldn't know about that," said Droopy.

"You see," informed Stellman, "we just got out of stir today, and then we read about you in the papers. So here we are. Well?"

I SMILED. "You just got out of stir? Then how could you know anything about the deaths?"

Stellman glared at me. "Never mind the side remarks. What do you know?"

"About the green heart? I'm not certain of anything about it," I admitted.

Their hands were suddenly chilly again. Stellman stepped toward me. "We've been very patient with you," he said.

"You have," I agreed, placing a cigarette between my lips. I picked my lighter off the night table and held it off to the left while I snapped it. The flame flared and Stellman's gaze diverted to it for just a fraction of a second.

But in that fraction my right fist drove home to his jaw and knocked him back into line between me and Droopy. I followed right up and shoved him hard against Droopy. They sprawled back on the bed. For my weight and build, I'm six-two and stop the scales at one-ninety, I can move fast. I whirled to the door and was halfway down the hall before they were on their feet.

They were still on the stairway when I gained the lobby and strode quickly outside and into a cab. The cab wheeled out into traffic and I leaned forward.

"Fifth and Forty-second—the Public Library," I told the driver. . . .

Up in the card-index room of the library I looked up the file numbers of several newspapers, made out my order slip and handed it in at the desk. In the reading room, while waiting for my number to flash on the board, I went over what I'd learned so far about the deaths of the doctors.

I had a hunch that Gammer, the man with the pain in his abdomen who'd visited both X-ray doctors just before they'd died, had intentionally neglected to tell me the name of his own physician. He knew something about the green heart, something he wanted to find out if I knew. And if his doctor was one I thought he might be, I was closer to breaking

the shell of this case than I'd hoped to be.

My number flashed on the board, and I went to the window and got bound copies of newspapers two months old. At last I found what I wanted after glancing through several editions.

GEM THIEF DIES AFTER KILLING DETECTIVE

Uses Sanatorium as Refuge;
Gem Missing

Bystander Wounded by Wild
Bullet

The account in the papers cleared up a lot. The bystander was Charles Gammer. Passersby had carried him, unconscious, into a small private sanatorium, the same sanatorium in which Keller, the gem thief, had taken refuge and died. The various newspaper accounts related how Doctor Jules Jollard, the owner of the sanatorium, had performed an immediate, single-handed operation to save Gammer's life. At least, the operation was single-handed until the arrival of an ambulance summoned by the police who found Keller lying dead in the hall.

I frowned at the papers. For a moment I thought I knew who had stolen the heart of emeralds, who had committed the murders. But something I'd heard said tonight I couldn't ignore, even though it kept me from sewing up this case—unless I could figure a new angle to explain the death of Dr. Plunkett, the second man to die.

I was very anxious to meet this Doctor Jollard, so I handed in the papers, and on the way to Jollard's I stopped briefly in a haberdashery to buy a hat.

Outside the sanatorium, I paused. Madison Avenue can appear very deserted at night after you've seen it jammed in the daytime. I felt I'd be walking into a hornet's nest if I went in, so why should I? Why not let the police mop up this case?

Then I thought of the attitude Meady and Kitting, the M. E. and the criminologist, had taken toward me; and Tollam's skepticism of my abilities. I thought of those doctors who'd been murdered.

Police, hell! I'd flushed these rats from their nests and I'd get them myself, I like to finish what I start, though I was still puzzled about the Plunkett angle.

FOR THE BENEFIT of anyone who might have been noticing from the windows opposite, I appeared to ring the night bell and wait a reasonable time for some one to answer. Actually, my hidden hand was inserting a clever little gadget into the lock. I stepped through the doorway and closed the door behind me. Gun in hand, I balanced a moment in the darkness and heard voices beyond the door across the room. I walked toward it as though I were pushing pins and needles into a cushion. I thrust open the door.

A man, obviously dead judging from the amount of blood on the floor, lay before me. Nearby was Gammer, unconscious, with an ugly bruise on the side of his head. Across the room, evidently Jollard's office, and a shabby one at that, Matt Stellman and Droopy Donlan were mauling a tall, dark man.

Droopy saw me and went for his gun. I fired, and the lobe of his right ear just wasn't there any more.

"Hold it," I warned as Stellman whirled. "Droopy, if you try any more fast moves, my next shot will be about a foot lower and to the left. Relax, boys, you've had a busy evening."

Stellman frowned. "Listen, McCarty, this setup isn't what you're thinking it is."

"No," glared Droopy, holding his ear, "we—"

"... Wouldn't know about this," I supplied.

"That's on the level, McCarty," in-

sisted Stellman. "This setup isn't what you're thinking."

I shook my head. "It's exactly what I'm thinking," I declared. Everything was clear now about Plunkett's death. "So we all figured," I remarked, "who took the emerald heart from Keller's body." And I looked at Jollard when I said it.

Jollard protested: "I haven't any green heart."

"But you know about it," I suggested.

"Of course," he snapped. "When the police didn't find it on Keller, they questioned me and searched this entire place. They still didn't find it and they exonerated me and said Keller must have passed it to his confederates before he came in here."

Stellman laughed at him. "Then what are Droopy and me doing here?"

I saw Jollard's face grow whiter. "Jollard," I said, "everyone here knows you took that heart. It's easy to figure. You heard Keller collapsing in the hall, and you went out, figuring you'd commandeer some one to assist you with the operation. When you saw Keller, you thought quickly. You knew there'd been a holdup. You searched him quickly and took the heart, then went on with your operation."

"You can't prove a word of that," challenged Jollard.

"Sure I can," I declared. "I know where the green heart is. There's only one place you could have hidden it, and that place ties you directly to the murder of Hardwicke and explains the death of Plunkett."

Jollard gestured wildly. "I didn't have anything to do with Plunkett's—I didn't have anything to do with either of them."

I smiled. "I heard you before you corrected yourself. I've got you on the Hardwicke death," I accused. I looked at Stellman. "Earlier tonight you suggested a deal to me. I think I know the information you were offering. You and Droopy hid out

after the holdup fizzled. Two nights ago you figured things had quieted enough for you to come back to town and try and locate that heart. Everything pointed to Jollard, but you couldn't get close enough to nab him, or the opportunity didn't offer itself. So you trailed him, and he led the way to Hardwicke's office."

Stellman scowled. "Are you accepting my deal?"

"No," I replied. "I don't have to. I've got Jollard, Hardwicke's murderer."

Droopy's fingers fidgeted and I shifted my attention to him for a moment.

GAMMER suddenly shouted from the floor. "Look out," he warned, and fired. Jollard stiffened and toppled to the floor. Droopy and Stellman went for their guns, but a shot from me changed their minds. Gammer rose.

"Jollard was going to give it to you," he said.

"I'm sorry you finished him," I remarked. "I wanted to have a little tête-à-tête with him about that shot he fired at me in my hotel tonight." I motioned toward the dead man lying near the door. "He's the fellow who trailed you and telephoned me tonight I guess."

Gammer nodded. "He's Jollard's handyman for this place." Gammer looked at me. "It was neat the way you bluffed Jollard into giving himself away. I mean about saying you knew what he had done with the green heart."

"My name's Bluff McCarty," I said. "Gammer, what made you tie these murders and your being trailed, to Jollard?"

"Just luck," he muttered. "I saw him when I left Plunkett's office last night. So after I saw you tonight, I came here to see if I could find out anything. Jollard had just killed the handyman."

"Jollard or you, Gammer!" I probed suddenly.

I fired from the hip and got him through the shoulder as his gun came up. Gammer tried to catch his gun with his left hand. I kicked the gun away, but he grabbed my foot and yanked me off balance. Droopy and Stellman started forward. I snapped a shot toward them and they stopped. I smashed my left into Gammer's face as he reached for my gun. He staggered back.

"You can't prove anything," he panted, gritting his teeth as he clutched at his shoulder.

"You're the only one who could have killed Plunkett," I declared. "Stellman and Droopy want information about the green heart. If they had gone to Plunkett, it would have been short-sighted of them to murder him if he knew anything. That leaves only you. And you came to my room tonight to find out just how much I knew, to find out if I was on Jollard's trail so I could link you to him and the green heart."

He glowered at me. "You're just guessing. If Jollard killed Hardwicke, why should you blame me for Plunkett's death?"

"Because Jollard's clear on Plunkett," I declared. "Not that he wouldn't have killed him if you hadn't done the job for him. You still doubt me, eh? All right. Jollard hid that green heart, but he waited too long to take it from its hiding place. He needed you for that, but you got out of the sanatorium and he had you trailed till he could nab you and bring you back. But unconsciously you didn't give him a chance."

"He had to kill Hardwicke because Hardwicke found out about the green heart when you went there. But the next night, when you went to Plunkett, Plunkett revealed to you what he learned. And you, seeing a double chance to make money by selling that heart and blackmailing Jollard because he had stolen it, killed Plunkett to silence him. Jollard couldn't have done that murder, because at the

Toppers Club I heard on good authority that last night Jollard was at the funeral services for Hardwicke. So you—"

Gammer gestured frantically. "You can't prove a word of that without the green heart. You're only bluffing, you don't know where it is."

I smiled at Droopy and Stellman who were listening intently.

"I'll show you where it is—*after* the police arrive. You boys might become impetuous otherwise," I said, reaching for the phone. . . .

The group of four from the Toppers Club came with the police. Reade, the commentator; Tollam, the speed-king with whom I'd wagered; and of course Meady, the medical examiner, and Kittring, the criminologist. They all listened to what I had to say. Then Meady spoke up.

"It appears to me everything depends on finding that green heart."

I nodded and saw Gammer staring uneasily at me. "There's an X-ray fluoroscope apparatus in the next room," I began.

EVERYONE saw Gammer start, the look of trapped fury in his eyes, and later at his trial it proved to be damaging evidence against him when his lawyers cross-examined us. He struggled in the arms of two burly policemen as he was dragged toward the X-ray fluoroscope. Meady flicked a switch, and we all saw the green heart. Not its color, of course, but its shadow—the same shadow Hardwicke and Plunkett had seen and for which they had been murdered.

Jollard, during that operation two months ago, had hidden the green heart in Gammer's body.

I looked at the others staring at that shadow on the X-ray plate. "Jollard," I said, "no doubt intended to keep Gammer here until he had arranged safely to dispose of that heart. Then he would have advised Gammer that an operation was necessary, saying the wound had not healed properly. But Gammer left before Jollard could stop him, so Jollard had to trail him and try to get him back and see that he went near no X-ray doctors. Unfortunately for Hardwicke and Plunkett, Gammer went to them. No doubt he hadn't been feeling well." The police head nodded. . . .

We were back in the Toppers Club. Meady and Kittring were thanking me for calling the papers again and saying that my earlier statement about the M. E. and the criminologist was not so, that all throughout the evening they had cooperated with me fully. It was my own idea about sending this statement to the papers. I had no wish to ruin the reputations of Meady and Kittring. A man can't be right all the time, and they were good sports about the way I had proved them wrong.

"I wasn't so easy on Tollam. I let him make out a check to my order for five thousand dollars.

"Here," he grumbled, handing it over. "You made good on your bluff."

"That's why I'm called Bluff McCarty," I smiled, slipping the check in my wallet. I saw Reade, the commentator, watching me as I said to Tollam: "I had to make good on that bluff and win the wager, because if I'd lost, I didn't have five thousand dollars to pay you."

Reade smiled at me. "I wonder . . . Bluff McCarty."

Watch for the Next

10-STORY DETECTIVE

All Yarns Packed with Exciting, Dramatic Tales

Little Timmy wanted to be a detective—like his benefactor, Big Jim Phillips. Timmy's experience was small, and his fists thin. But he knew how to point

Finger of Doom

By
Rex Grahame



*The forces of the law
were taking no chances
with the wily River Street
gang.*

BIG JIM PHILLIPS had only been out of harness one month, and he didn't want to lose what it had taken three years of hard work to attain: plain clothes. But indignant anger forced him to fling open the door of Detective Captain O'Brien's office. He stood there fighting to restrain himself, blue eyes flashing fire, in front of his superior officer.

Captain O'Brien jerked his head up in surprise from some reports he was reading. "What the hell's the big idea, Phillips?" he barked.

Plainclothes man Phillips drew a couple of breaths, gulped.

"Well?" demanded the captain, his face slowly turning a deep red. "Are ye balmy, man? Speak up. What d'ye mean by bustin' in here like this?"

Phillips finally burst out: "Just this. You're not goin' to make a stoolie outta that kid, Timmy Wellman. I'll not stand for it! I spent a year puttin' that kid on his feet—hospital, clothes, schoolin', coupla shoe-shine concession jobs—and he's like my own to me."

The captain half rose from behind his desk, fists banging down on its top. "Oh, *you're* not goin' to stand fer it, eh?" he bellowed, deep-red face now turning slightly purple. "You're not! . . . Listen, you'd better watch your tongue, Phillips, or you'll be back on a beat quicker than you're slated for now—the poor work you've been doin' in plain clothes. . . . An' it just so happens that I'm *not* usin' Timmy as a stool. He wants to be a great big, dandy detective like you—" sarcastically—"so he's been keepin' his eyes an' ears open around saloons and pool halls and such, and at his shine concession in the Arcadia Dance Hall. And some of his info may prove pretty fair leads."

"It's stoolin' just the same," Jim Phillips insisted, hotly.

Captain O'Brien roared: "He has nothin' to do with any crooks. He only tells me what he sees around different places."

"Well, I'm goin' to find Timmy and see that he stops it—at once!" Phillips returned, voice rising also. "I'm not goin' to have that poor little kid shot fulla lead. . . . But what would you know about a kid, captain? I've never known you to even speak to one."

The choleric color receded from the detective captain's face, and slowly he sank back into his chair. In almost a whisper he said:

"Yes, I had a kid once, long ago. Died with its mother. . . . All right, Phillips—you're right. Have a good stiff talk with Timmy. Tell him he can't bring any more of his detective-game reports in here. Make him stay out of the dives; make him stick to shoe-shining in the Arcadia and that other concession you got him."

Big Jim Phillips' face relaxed into a half smile as he said: "Thanks, captain. Can't tell you how glad I am you see it that way. I—"

The captain cut in, gruffly: "Okay, okay, Phillips—we'll drop the matter right there. See that you get over tonight and keep an eye on the River Street gang. They're throwin' a banquet shindig tonight an' windin' up the party at the dance hall. Be on hand there an' see if you've got the brains to pick up anythin' interestin'. And remember, no more phony arrests. Your work during the next week'll tell whether or not ye go back into harness. . . . That'll be all."

"Yes, sir." Phillips turned stiffly and strode from the office. He was hoping he'd found out in time about the kid's visits to the captain. Why in hell hadn't Timmy told him what he'd been up to?

LATER, Jim Phillips climbed into his car and drove to Timmy's home. There he found the kid helping his grandmother, the only relative he had left, with the supper dishes.

"Evenin', Grandma; evenin', Timmy," the big plainclothes man said heartily. He noticed that the old woman was unusually strained, that there was a look of deep dread in her eyes as she turned to greet him. The detective turned again to Timmy.

"Young man, I want to have a talk with you tonight, so you'll just start out a little earlier for the Arcadia. I'm going—" He stopped short as Timmy's grandmother shook her head slightly, significantly. Phillips hadn't wanted to talk to Timmy in front of her about the kid's playing detective; didn't want to worry the old lady.

"Run along outside, Timmy, and wait for Jim there," she said. "I want to speak to Jim alone."

Timmy looked from one to the other with large, dark eyes set in a thin, narrow face. "Okay," he said, and picking up his shoe-shine box, he left.

The old woman dabbed a tear out of

her eye with a corner of her apron; then she said, in jerky sentences: "Timmy's been to the hospital today. I didn't want to tell you, but he's had several heart attacks lately. Well, they say he can't live more than a few months more at the most—might even go any time."

Jim Phillips' heart dropped, and as realization sank in, a lump grew to uncomfortable size in his throat.

"But—but if he stops work, takes it easy?"

"They said that wouldn't make the slightest bit of difference—not to tell the poor boy—let him go on just as he has been. Oh, and you've done so much for him, Jim—done so much for both of us."

Everything seemed like a strange dream to Jim Phillips as he left the house after comforting the old lady. And Timmy, waiting outside with a welcoming smile on his pale face, made the lump in his throat return.

Jim Phillips had planned quite a lecture for Timmy on the kid's playing detective, but now he cut it as short as possible. Timmy grumbled and complained, but Phillips told him it would be time enough to study the detective business after he'd graduated from high school.

"You're going to start high school after summer's over, you know, Timmy," he said.

"But I gotta work all the time to take care of grandma!"

The lump was getting worse in Phillips' throat as he forced a smile to his face and said: "You just let your ol' Uncle Jim take care of that."

Adoration shone in Timmy's eyes as he breathed: "Gee—that's swell, Jim. . . . Say, Jim, how're ya doin', now as you're a detectif?"

Big Jim Phillips smiled a bit ruefully as he replied: "Well, Timmy my lad, the captain has given me one more week. Those two arrests I made didn't stick. That River Street gang has a lot of pull and dough and mouthpieces and stuff like that. But don't worry, kid, your Uncle Jim'll

come through all right." Phillips started toward his car. "Come along, Timmy, let's get goin'. I'll ride you over to the Arcadia. I have an assignment there, myself, later in the evening."

Timmy's hand fell on the plain-clothes man's sleeve. "Wait a minute, Jim. After all you've done fer me, Jim, I hope I c'n help you. An' I will. I'll ketch a murderer fer you one of these days—I betcha! . . . Say, Jim, why don't you go in more fer fingerprint stuff—yeah, that's the biz to ketch crooks with. When I get to police college, that's what I'm goin' in fer—fingerprint stuff."

The two got into the plain-clothes man's auto, and the car moved off.

Presently Phillips asked: "By the way, Timmy, why didn't you tell me about the detective work you were practising with the captain?"

JIM PHILLIPS saw Timmy hang his head in embarrassment as he answered: "Well—well, I wanted to surprise you if I could get somethin' big. Gee, I'd like to fix it so's you could ketch a murderer, Jim—after all you've done for me. Betcha I could, too, maybe with a little time; if you'd only let me have the chancet."

Phillips' lips tightened, and the lump in his throat became suffocating as he snapped sternly: "None o' that! None o' that. You've got your orders—see that you obey 'em!"

"Y-yes—sir," Timmy gulped. . . .

The River Street gang began to arrive at the Arcadia Dance Hall at nine o'clock, and the floor became crowded. Jim Phillips sat at an inconspicuous place among the many refreshment tables crowded with sitters-outs along the sides of the dance floor. Occasionally he sipped a lemonade as he watched the gang members. Typical mugs in flashy, expensive clothes—rats made rich by a score of bilking rackets. Everything was orderly; even the drunks were comparatively inoffensive. Even Spike Dugan, habit-

ual rowdy at parties, was unusually quiet.

Timmy passed around among the tables, and now and then got a customer for his trade with the shoe-shine box. The kid walked by the plainclothes man at a little before ten o'clock, throwing a smile over his shoulder. Phillips called him to the table.

"Keepin' your hands clean tonight, Timmy?" he asked. "Don't get careless about usin' a rag for the polish."

Timmy set his shoe-shine box down beside the detective's table and spread his hands out for inspection. They were clean.

"That's a good boy," Phillips approved. "On your way home by ten, Timmy."

The kid said: "Okay, Jim. Just been told there's a phone call for me. Maybe it's important. I'll go home right afterward. I'll leave my shine box here with you."

The orchestra blared on and on with its loud syncopations. Finally it stopped for intermission, and the comparative quiet was a relief to Phillips—but not for long.

The thin, shrill shriek of a girl cut the air from the direction of the telephone booths in an alcove off one corner of the dance floor.

Big Jim Phillips' legs worked like steel springs, and in a second he was racing across the floor. Then he was pushing people out of his way right and left. It didn't take him long to find out what had been the cause of the scream. It lay behind the closed door of one of the phone booths; behind a door not quite closed, so that the light inside was not turned on. But there was enough light to show the tragedy crumpled inside. Big Jim opened the door.

Thin little Timmy lay in a limp heap at the bottom of the booth. His dark eyes were fixed in a glazed stare that seemed to be focused on something far away. His white lips were twisted in the expression that sudden pain had brought upon them.

The anguished heart of Jim Phillips was sending the blood racing angrily through his big body. He wanted to bend down and pick up the frail figure in his arms; but, according to regulations, the body could not be moved until after medical examination.

Phillips suddenly bent down, eyes narrowing. On each wing of Timmy's collar were fingerprints—black, clear, plain. Phillips saw that they had been made with shoe polish. And the kid had been bugs about fingerprints. Big Jim knew that, even as he died, the kid had done this to try to tell something. The prints were not smudged; they had obviously been carefully made by Timmy.

Jim Phillips rose, sighed. Poor little Timmy had done too much detective playing. Done too much spying and running with tips to Captain O'Brien's office.

"Nobody's to leave here!" Phillips snapped, whirling on the encircling crowd. Then, raising his voice: "You mugs in the River Street gang are all here, an' you'd better all be here when the boys from headquarters arrive."

NO ONE said anything. The River Street gang stood or walked about, sneering, Spike Dugan the most sneerful of them all.

Big Jim Phillips called headquarters and then gloomily visualized poor little Timmy's death. The kid had been lured into the phone booth. Even with the loud dance music drowning sound, the killer had pressed his gun close to Timmy's body, to muffle the noise. For powder marks showed over Timmy's heart. Then the youngster, dying, had slid to the bottom of the booth. But before he had gone out completely, he had managed to make those shoe-polish fingerprints on his collar. Fingerprints, fingerprints—Timmy meant something definite by them. . . .

After the usual fingerprinting and photographing were finished, Phil-

lips stood a little to one side with Captain O'Brien.

"I feel like hell, the captain said. "It's my own damned fault. I'd give my right arm—"

Phillips said musingly: "He'd have gone out soon anyway. That's the way he'd probably look at it, captain. Tell you about it later, when I get the guy who did the job."

"Queer about the finger marks on the kid's collar," commented Captain O'Brien.

Jim Phillips was as certain as he was sure he was standing there that those finger marks held the clue to Timmy's murderer. He yearned for action.

"Yeah," he said cautiously. "Like Timmy had put 'em there to tell us somethin'."

The captain snorted. "Too thin—could have been accidental durin' the death throes."

"But they look too deliberately done—not smeared," Phillips returned.

The captain shrugged, then said: "Well, guess I'll have to let these people go."

"Wait a minute," Phillips stopped the captain. "Don't let 'em go yet. By hell, I'm going to make an arrest if it's the last thing I do. . . . Captain, have that River Street gang line up. I wanta look 'em over."

Captain O'Brien looked at the rookie plainclothes man in amazement. Then, sceptically, he said: "You'll have to give me good reason, Phillips."

"I can't do that now, captain. I don't know enough. But you'll just have to let me go through with this—for Timmy's sake."

"Nothin' doin'!" the captain snorted.

Phillips caught hold of his superior officer in a tight grip. "Captain, you were just admittin' that it was your fault the kid got killed. Feel pretty badly about that, don't you?"

The captain nodded slowly.

"Well," continued Phillips, "if

you'll let me have my way in this, you'll get a chance to feel better about it. Otherwise, you never will. You were about to kick me back on a beat, anyway—"

Captain O'Brien hesitated, finally nodded and said: "Okay, Phillips. I'm afraid you've got me—but it's against my will."

Jim Phillips knew he was up against a hell of a blank wall, but he had to try anything. He had to go on desperately hoping he'd get the answer—for Timmy's sake. But things were black. The murder gun: probably heaved unretrievably into the river from one of a score of windows of the Arcadia; the note the refreshment-stand girl had found on her counter to tell Timmy of a phone call—thrown in a trash receptacle long since emptied. And as for paraffin tests of the hands of the River Street gang, to determine if one of them had recently fired a gun—a newly invented steel gauntlet could easily have been used to obviate any reliability of such a test.

THE RIVER STREET gang lined up at Captain O'Brien's barking command. Like a firing squad the half dozen men stood before the phone booth in which the pitiful little murder victim lay. Two morgue boys bent over to lift up Timmy and put him in a wicker basket.

"Hold it!" Phillips snapped. "Wait a few minutes before you move him." Then he turned his attention to the River Street gang lined up before him.

Sneering, confident and ugly, they faced him. Dugan, believed to be the gang's official executioner, was the most arrogant of the lot. Phillips cross-examined several of them, desperate, stalling for time—trying to realize what Timmy's finger marks were intended to mean. He was hoping that something, he knew not what, would come to him so that he could grab the murderer. He knew he was being a fool. But he had to try

anything, even at the risk of his police career, for the sake of Timmy.

Phillips was getting no place when the captain said: "Three of the five minutes are up for the questioning I'm letting ye have. I can't hold these people any longer. Their mouth-piece'll be along any minute now."

Dugan spat disgustedly on the floor and said: "Phillips, yuh punk, we let you off easy on those other two phony arrests you made. It you get funny this time, I'll sue the limit. You'll get kicked clean off the force."

Jim Phillips was incapable of doing anything more. He felt that he was licked. But he kept wondering and wondering where Timmy had gotten the shoe polish with which to make the fingerprints on his collar—when he'd left his shoe-shining equipment at the table.

Then it struck Phillips what the kid had done. He couldn't be sure, but he was going to bank on the thought that had suddenly come to him. Quickly he ran his gaze over the men lined up before him. Dressed fit to kill, shoes gleaming with fresh shines, they stood arrogantly defiant. Then Jim Phillips leaped forward, fist lashing out—straight at Spike Dugan. Dugan went down in a tangle. . . .

It wasn't long after that, just when Dugan was coming to—with the bracelets on him—that Jim Phillips was explaining things to Captain O'Brien.

"You see, captain," he said, "when Timmy got the slug in him he had one last idea—to identify his murderer, and by using his pet subject, fingerprints. The kid was dying. But when he slid down to the floor of the phone booth, he managed to rub his fingers on Dugan's shoes. That was how he got the polish to make the fingerprints on his collar."

Dugan was conscious now, but still groggy. He gaped in amazement at his feet. For his shoes had been removed—by Phillips.

"I hope you're right," said O'Brien. "I hope the kid's fingerprints are—"

One of the Bertillion boys came up and said laconically, as though the whole business was just unimportant routine stuff: "You're right, Phillips. The kid's fingerprints are on Dugan's shoes. I'll have to make a better set of 'em for court exhibits. But they're the same. The kid got the polish on his hands offa Dugan's shoes when the guy put the slug in him in the phone booth. His prints on Dugan's shoes'll put the guy in the chair. But he'll have to go down to the cooler without any shoes, 'cause I don't wanta take a chance on havin' the prints rubbed off."

"I had to jump him, captain," Phillips said. "I couldn't speak up about prints when I noticed Dugan's smudged shoes or maybe he'd have had time to rub the evidence off."

The captain massaged his chin thoughtfully, said: "Well, Phillips, you were right. The prints match an' I'm sure we'll get an indictment. . . . Hum, I can't very well demote you to a beat now, but I'm goin' to have quite a job to teach you not to take crazy chances. Even though I must admit you did some quick thinkin'. . . . Now, what was it you were goin' to tell me about feelin' better about Timmy if you got his murderer?"

Phillips' eyes clouded with grief as he said: "You see, captain, the docs said the kid couldn't live longer than a few months at the most. Timmy always wanted to catch a murderer. So Timmy died at the happiest, top moment of his life. That's why I had to—"

"You're a crazy, sentimental fool!" the captain snorted, but a little of the sadness was gone from his eyes. "Get outta here!" he roared. "Let's get going!"

Through the years of his life, Big Jim Phillips kept a shabby shoe-shine box in a glass case atop his book case. Friends unfamiliar with the story of Timmy, often inquired about it. But none got an answer. Some made humorous remarks—but never more than once. . . .

The only way Detective Jim Gardner could solve the ghastly cement murder mystery was to allow himself to be buried alive and then . . .

Return from Hell



By
**Arthur
Flint**

IT was a desolate, deserted section which The Atlas Motor Company had selected for the site of its new plant. And the bitter cold wind which swept down the Detroit River that morning in January made construction a lot tougher for the McGann Contracting Corporation. The heavy snowfall of the night before covered the big job in a vast and discouraging white blanket.

A group of pick-and-shovel artists, chattering about a bonfire, fell silent as little Tim Egan, labor foreman, came up to them briskly. "Start throwin' out the snow from thim holes, boys," he ordered brusquely. "Tony, come along! See if thim piers is friz."

Tony left the cheering warmth with reluctance. The newly poured concrete piers were covered with tar-

paulins and warmed by coke-burning salamanders beneath. After a short struggle with a knot Egan lifted the tarp over the third pier, then dropped the rope as if it were hot. "Saints preserve us!" he yelled.

Big Ray Emerson, the general super, lumbered up as Tim continued shouting and waving his arms. Spurts of vapor puffed from Emerson's mouth as he jerked out a question.

"Did that concrete freeze? A man would think somebody was killed—"

"A corpse, it is indade, Mr. Emerson—shure," Tim Egan whispered as the curious came closer, "an' it's no-

Deliberately he reached into his coat and held up a pair of handcuffs.

TSD

body but young Thorpe, that new timekeeper."

"Good grief! Johnny Thorpe? . . . Wait, Tim." The super whirled on the men. "Don't touch anything! The timekeeper fell in this hole and I'll take care of him. Go on back to your jobs—beat it!" They did. Emerson was the sort of a boss who did not have to speak twice. But his voice was a shade husky when he turned back to the foreman. "Is he dead, Tim?"

Egan loosed another rope and began throwing back the tarp.

"Shure, an' I had but the one look, him bein' huddled upside down on his head."

"Poor kid," said Emerson softly. "His leg was touching that salamander when it was red hot."

But the little open stove, used to prevent fresh concrete from freezing, was now black and almost cold. The superintendent stepped across to the pier form and descended. Touched an oddly twisted arm gingerly, then, compressing his lips, removed a glove and thrust a hand against the lad's breast. He coughed and looked up, regret plain in his deep brown eyes.

"Cold and stiff, Tim Poor chap! He must have slipped in during the blizzard which came on just before quitting time. His head hit one of these braces and stunned him so that he froze to death when the fire burned out. Maybe he broke his neck when he fell—it's seven feet to this footer. Well, we won't move him. We'll let the police see it just as it was."

"I think you're right, sorr," said the foreman, frowning when Emerson climbed out. "But he didn't freeze, that's sartain. The air's still warm, because I give old Jonas, the night watchman, strict orders to throw on a shovel of coke at midnight. It wuzz gittin' cold at five an' I didn't wanta run no chances o' freezin' them piers, whut with steel comin' the week. Tony an' me looked at them first two piers, then come to this wan."

"He's upside down," Emerson mused, "and lying next to that salamander. Funny Jonas didn't see him. How did you recognize him with one look, Tim? You couldn't see his face."

"Shure, an' I saw his red an' green mackinaw. . . . Say-y, are yez accusin' me o' pushin' the lad in, Mister Emerson?" Tim asked heatedly.

"No, but the police might ask us some hard questions," the super returned heavily. "Well, tie that tarp rope and we'll go up to my office and report it to them right away." As they moved away he turned to the worried little man beside him. "If that tarp rope was tied down he couldn't have fallen in, Tim. You sure all those ropes were tied to the stakes?"

Egan scratched the back of his neck with a mittened hand.

"Lemme think. Seems to me they was I'm sure of it. I was cussin' some because I had to take off me mitts to untie the knot. I larned old Jonas to drop a double half-hitch over— Say-y, boss, that was a double overhand knot I untied. Bejabers, Jonas either got careless or else somebody shoved the pore feller in an' tied a different kind of a knot!"

Tim halted dead in his tracks and stared, goggle-eyed, at the super. Ray Emerson nodded. "I think so, too, Tim. Johnny Thorpe was murdered! But—good grief—why?"

That was Saturday, the fourteenth of January.

"**T**HAT'S the story, Gardner," president Thomas McGann was saying the following Monday. "I'm hoping that the Gardner Detective Agency can do us some good."

The slender young man in McGann's private office carefully flicked the ash from a stogie into the cuspidor at the end of the president's desk. His hands and face had the deep-tanned look of an outdoor man. He looked supple, intelligent, capable. He sat leaning forward in his chair, but his gray eyes were half-closed as he studied the beefy, red-faced contrac-

tor who had given him the stogie. A vagrant thought brought a faint grin to his generous mouth.

He thought: "You'd look more at home pushing a barrow of bricks than a pencil, Tom McGann." He said: "Know anything about that murdered lad's family, Mr. McGann?"

The swivel chair creaked back under the weight of the big-bodied construction man. "I'll say," he mused. "In the old days Jack Thorpe and I worked side by side 'on the wall.' It was Jack's studying books which got me started, but he was a good brickie, Jack was. A scaffold busted under him." The contractor wagged his head.

"Anybody now to support the widow?"

"Jane Thorpe, my secretary, whom you saw when I dictated the letter to Ray Emerson. By the way, they haven't been told it was murder."

Gardner nodded. McGann went on:

"I'd like to do something for them. If Johnny had just come to me instead of to the job I would have made him a sort of inspector," McGann said ruefully. "But he was independent, like his dad. I could have paid him more and an inspector of my own would have pleased the owners. A little trick of the trade."

McGann laughed and Gardner grinned. "An old dodge."

"Having had five years in the building business yourself, you know that a contractor has to watch the corners. In fact, it was because of your construction experience that I phoned for you instead of a more seasoned detective. I think you're smart enough to find out the trouble for us, if there is anything wrong. At any rate the stockholders might forget lack of profits and remember that I'm holding our organization together in tough times."

Gardner already had ideas, but he said nothing. He rose as a girl came in with his letter of introduction. And as the president read it the detective once more refreshed his eyesight. He

had trained himself for years to notice minute details, but it was not all habit now. Jane Thorpe was worth looking at.

Her wavy brown hair was caught in a knot at the nape of her white neck on which lay a small and tantalizing curl. Slender, graceful, in a chic blue business suit and frilly waist, she waited in front of McGann's desk. Aware of his intense gaze, she turned and colored slightly as their eyes met. James Gardner dropped his gaze with a stir of sympathy as he read the tragic pain in the dark depths of her soft brown eyes. She smiled faintly, for the hard alertness of his face was, in that moment, softened.

"That will be all, Jane," McGann said gently. He handed the letter to Gardner as the girl closed the door. "There you are. Ray Emerson will put you on as inspector whether he likes it or not."

"Emerson's a pretty good construction super, is he?"

"Not so good as I thought. Costs run high. He was supposed to know his stuff, too, but—" the contractor spread the fingers of two hairy red hands—"he ran one big job for me and lost fifty thousand, but it was tough and I gave him another chance. Looks like he'd lose more'n that on this Atlas job. You find out what the hell's wrong and don't come near me until you do."

Gardner nodded. But he nodded at a photo of young Johnny Thorpe as if making a promise to the clean, aggressive young face. He laid the photo gently on the desk and walked to the door. "I want a free rein to use my own judgment or I don't play ball."

McGann's bushy red brows drew together, then he smiled grimly. "You've got it, son. Gimme results."

"I will," Gardner said to himself as he closed the door.

THE secretary looked up from her desk, and in a swift, gliding movement he was beside her.

"Will you have lunch with me, Miss Thorpe?" he asked in a low voice. Jane Thorpe blushed but shrank back a little. "Wanta help you if I can," he explained with a tinge of gruffness. "Meet me at the entrance of the Continental Bank building at a quarter after twelve. And—" he jerked a thumb toward the office he had just left—"don't brag about the honor."

The girl smiled, but when she nodded her understanding, Jimmy Gardner wanted to give her slender shoulder a comforting pat. Those dark eyes were bright with unshed tears.

Gardner did not kid himself about his ability as a detective. He was anything but the hard-boiled type. The sort, rather, who would stoop to pat a homeless pup; with whom men were on easy speaking terms at once. But he had a hard-reasoning intelligence which groped for cold facts, and a year of routine work with a first-class agency had taught him their methods.

He waited with impatience, and when Jane Thorpe arrived right on the dot, he greeted her with a warm smile. "Good girl. Bet you're a wonder as a private secretary."

Her eyes were wide with question when they walked away.

"Who are you, Mr. Gardner?"

"Bet you're a good cook, too," he parried with a chuckle.

"I know you now," she returned with a gay little laugh. "You're Diamond Jim, the big gambler who bets on anything."

"Wrong. Always bet on sure things, like any good gambler," he said gravely. But there was a twinkle in his gray eyes as he looked down at her lovely face. "But I have other attractions. I can make the best Irish stews you ever ate, and if you like 'em we'll go to Mother Coughlin's. She throws 'em together nearly as well as your latest admirer."

"That's a new line, I'll admit," scoffed the girl, showing an unexpected dimple. "But I'm disappointed." He wanted to know how come. "Why, here, while I've been thinking

of you as a modern Sir Galahad rescuing damsels in distress, I find you waving a meat chopper and a pewter spoon."

"And no armor," added the man with a sigh. "Well, it's something to have you thinking of me at all." He waited hopefully, but the girl did not reply. But he was determined to make her cheerful and his gay spirits were not to be thwarted. Before their meal was finished she had laughingly consented to call him "Jimmy."

A moment of silence, then she gathered up gloves and purse. He held up a hand. Again, his face wore a look of alert hardness and his gray eyes were no longer laughing.

"Business now, Jane. I mean to learn things and I'm charging this meal to the McGann Corporation. My card reads—Gardner Detective Agency, but it's a little different line than most. I investigate ailing concerns. Or, rather," he added with a boyish grin, "I intend to. I quit the construction game a year ago to be a detective. Figured there was a big field for a man with the right equipment. Just opened up. My first job."

"I see. So you picked on me, expecting me to betray the private business of my employer."

Jimmy Gardner grinned slightly as two red spots leaped into her apple blossom cheeks, wondering if some of her indignation was from feminine pique.

"Hold everything, Jane. I picked on you for several good reasons. One, you're Johnny Thorpe's sister. I'm hired to find out what ails the McGann contracts, but—hang on tight now, sister. I think your brother's death is connected with that trouble. I believe Johnny was killed for a purpose. I want your help."

For a moment the girl's slim fingers clawed the table cloth, then her soft lips closed tightly. "I'll help," she said.

"AN inspector!" yelled Drew, chief timekeeper and cashier, the following morning. "The boss says

you go on the payroll as an inspector. An inspector!" He eyed the young fellow outside the window of the construction office. "What in hell are you gonna inspect? The job is lousy with the owner's inspectors and, now, Emerson puts on one. He oughta have his head examined. No wonder he loses money."

Jimmy Gardner kicked off an ice-heel from a high-laced boot, and glared at the timekeeper. "Your job is to keep time and pay me my money on Saturdays and let Mr. Emerson hire the men he thinks he needs; fire those he doesn't. You do your little job, fella, and I'll do mine. What I do on the job is none of your business."

"There's twelve hundred men on this job under me and I make it my business to know what they do."

"Then," Gardner sneered, inwardly chuckling at his goat-getting, "this will be the first job I ever saw run by a dumb clerk."

"Say-y! . . . You're too lippy for your own health, guy!" With this, Drew yanked open the door beside the window and barged out. He was a thick-chested young fellow, a little taller than the detective. His eyes were a hard china blue, eyelashes and eyebrows sandy. "I'm gonna make a good dog outa you right now, fresh guy. I'll show you—"

His open hand swung around in a savage sweep at Gardner's cheek. But it never got there. Mid-air, his thick wrist was caught in a grip of steel, a twisting yank and he sat down—hard. With a deep bellow, he scrambled to his feet. Crouched and lunged, fists flying. Gardner's own hard fist started somewhere near his knees. In the last split second he pulled his arm slightly and his fist grazed along the Drew nose. Blood spurted.

"Damn you!" Oblivious to the gory stream flowing down his white shirt, the timekeeper rushed in. Men on the near-by job flocked to the scene like hungry chickens. Ray Emerson with Tim Egan close behind, came around

the corner of the construction office. They saw the newcomer step lightly aside. His right fist moved up in a blur and exploded under Drew's chin with an ominous whack. The chief timekeeper went over backward, gave a convulsive kick, and lay still.

"Oboy, oboy! Can that fella hit!" exclaimed Tim Egan. "Um-m!"

Emerson gripped the victor's shoulder. "Come back to my office, Gardner."

The operative nodded and accompanied him in silence around the corner of the shanty. Out of sight, the big fellow halted and grinned. "You've started something, young fella. Not that Aleck Drew didn't have it coming to him. He's a bull-dozer and I've itched at times to paste him a couple, myself. Had to keep peace in the family, though, and jobs are mighty scarce these days. He's old Tom McGann's nephew."

"Let's take a little walk over the job," Gardner said irrelevantly. "You can tell me more of what you want done. I want to see the spot where you found young Thorpe and get your version of what you saw and guessed." They strode out together. "Since you mention it, I did know that our friend, Drew, was McGann's nephew. I made him sore on purpose."

"Well," said the super whimsically, "maybe you have a better drag with the Old Man." His eyes narrowed. "You with the police, Gardner?"

"No, I'm a private investigator." He explained the circumstances. "Only three beside myself know what I'm here for. And three's enough."

"Okay. Glad you told me, Jimmy. Maybe I can help. My costs smell to high heaven and I'm being made the goat. What I need is a live assistant to help me watch things. Well, we can go over those things later. Here's where we found Johnny."

The detective asked a few questions after the super told what he knew, then stared a few seconds into the hole, glanced around at the immediate territory, and turned away. Emerson

showed his disappointment. "You don't seem much interested, Gardner."

"I talked with the police yesterday afternoon and I've seen all there is to see, Ray. Thorpe was hit over the head, just enough to stun him, and then dropped into the pit. That coke gas killed him before he could come to and get out. Remember the police found only a small lump on the side of his head. Otherwise, there were no other marks. But it was a death hole with the tarp holding in that gas, and somebody on the job was smart enough to know that. I heard he was a little cocky. Perhaps, he got some man's time wrong and refused to fix it—say some one of your Mex laborers."

"A Mex would've used a knife," Emerson said. He scratched an ear, reached in his pocket for a plug of tobacco and bit off a chunk. "No, Johnny might've been a little cocky, but he was a likable little cuss. As I told the cops, I couldn't figure why anybody would want to put him away, but it must have been his job."

"You've hit it," the detective said laconically.

Emerson introduced the "inspector" to the rest of the men in the field office. There was young Bill, a half-grown youth who wrote the super's letters, filed blueprints, and did errands. Fred Slemmins, the purchasing agent, with a persistent grouch and a susceptibility to colds, had an office to himself across a central hall from Emerson's. He was thirty, slender, capable, a worker.

Next to his office was the reception room presided over by Agnes, the switchboard operator, and a stenographer, an acid-voiced spinster who wrote Slemmins' letters and orders. Directly across the hall was the time-keeping office with a big safe. George Perkins, a moody, if hard-working young fellow, was Drew's assistant. It was plain to the newcomer that George did most of the work while his chief got the credit.

At the end of the hall was a room

for the field layout engineers, where they kept their instruments and argued over their notes. Emerson gave him a desk in there.

Aleck Drew remained hostile, but he did not reopen hostilities. Gardner went about his new work quietly, sensible of the reason for the respect in which the other boys held him. It tickled him, too. He was fairly certain of several things, but he wanted to wait for the weekly payroll to be made up. The time week closed Thursday night for the pay Saturday noon.

From the start he had had a strong theory as to where to look for the difficulties, but he was not one to jump on a mere guess. His problem was to make certain of who was doing the crooked work. And if he called at the Thorpe home every night, part of his purpose, at least, was to learn more of the personnel and history of the organization.

FRIDAY, Tim Egan was placing concrete for the huge foundation of the cupola. The concrete was brought hot from the central mixing plant by one-cubic-yard trucks, which backed up a short ramp and discharged their loads. It was five o'clock, dark, and the thermometer hovering around zero when the job was done. Jimmy Gardner hugged a glowing salamander and stayed on.

"Beggorra a man's a dom fool tuh folly construction in this could country," wailed Tim Egan. "Git them salamanders down below an' the tarps over it now, lads, an' make it snappy!" The last was addressed to the shivering workmen, after which he turned to the inspector. "Ye shud be inside, Mister Gardner. O' course I'm pleased wi' your company, but ye oughta trust Tim Egan tuh do a good job o' concrete without your eagle eye on him ivery minit."

"I was born in Iceland's greasy mountains," Gardner chuckled. He reached out and took the foreman's dog-eared time book. "I'll put 'em down for you, Tim, while you warm

your hands." And while he did it he made a mental note that fourteen men were chargeable to concrete placing; that Wednesday's gang was twenty-two.

"Let's see, Tim. Wednesday you were pouring that retaining wall. Quite a sizable gang you run for concrete, don't you?"

"Your own orders were to rap both sides of the form," Tim retorted, bristling a little. "Bedad, that took four extra men. Thin you wanted it spaded better and the iron rods shook more. Shure, I c'd kape down me costs if you fellas'd let me. Now on the Akron—"

"I didn't say you had more men than you need," Gardner laughed, who had heard of that job several times from the loquacious foreman. "Well, I'm pushing along, Tim. Have to come out here tonight to catch up on my reports. S'long."

The construction office was dark at nine that night when he approached it. He locked his car near by and stood a moment looking down at the silent job. He thought he saw the watchman moving around, but the sky was overcast and the visibility poor. Boldly switching on the lights at the front door, he went directly to the time-keeping office. He had the combination from Emerson and it was the work of seconds to open the big safe.

He was just examining the payroll book for Saturday's pay when a board creaked. Then the lights went out. In one leap he was between the door and the pay window, reaching out for the knob. It was dead-locked and he had to use both hands. A flashlight flicked on and off before he could open the door.

Three men, big and burly in those shadows, leaped upon him. Speechless, deadly, they came. A heavy club glanced off his left arm as he slipped sidewise, paralyzing the muscles for a space. Between clutching hands he shot out his hard fist, but he was a little off balance and he connected with a jaw made of stone. The man

only snarled an oath as his thick arm clamped around Gardner's neck.

A vicious jab in the man's stomach, a twist downward and Gardner was free. His right hand clutched a chair. Swung viciously at a second face looming ghastly in the pale, eerie light. That man dropped with a groan. But another hurtled at him from the passage at the same instant that number one dived at his knees.

On the floor Gardner fought like a wounded tiger to avoid the upraised blackjack he saw coming. The first blow thudded close beside his ear. A man drove downward with both knees in his stomach and Gardner doubled up in agony. His breath whistled through his teeth as if he had asthma. Then the detective's arms were flung down, his jaw thrust violently sidewise. He bit savagely on a finger over his mouth, heard a yell of pain as the bludgeon fell.

CHILL night air revived the operative. He was being carried to a dark sedan which had been backed up near the office door. His arms were bound behind by a leather thong from one of his own boots. He strained at them cautiously, but they were drawn tight. From the job came a hoarse shout, a shot, then a sharp yell.

"The watchman saw the fool after all," grumbled the man who stood beside the car. There was a husk in that voice and Gardner tried vainly to recall whose it was. Through half-opened lids he tried to recognize him, but the fellow's slouch hat was pulled down and his chin was buried in his overcoat. Nor did the detective know the two plug uglies carrying him.

"Dump 'm in," ordered the husky voice. "We might have to take him some place else."

"Wait," rumbled a deep-voiced thug, "here comes Ed—"

"No names, you fool," snapped a husky voice, who seemed to be bossing things. "I'll talk with him." His feet crunched the snow three times, then he stopped. "Hit that Hawkshaw

another lick. He'll be coming around soon."

"Oke," said another hoodlum, the one holding Gardner's legs. He let Gardner's feet drop and reached into his overcoat. The man at his head shifted his grip and in that instant Gardner twisted free like a spring uncoiling. He rolled over once, scrambled up, slipped in the snow and butted "husky voice" in the stomach.

The man clutched at him as they went down in a tangle. Gardner went on over in a somersault; was on his feet before the other two could grab him. But his bound arms impeded his movements. Ed, unseen, raced across the snow and bore him down before he could get clear. The others jumped on him with crushing animosity. The blackjack rose—fell.

Gardner was dimly conscious of warm air fanning his cheek when he again opened his eyes. Gaseous air. He promptly closed his eyes to slits and tried to make out in that murky light what was going on. He was stiff and sore and his head throbbed terrifically from that last brutal blow on the temple. He thought a rib was broken where some one had kicked him. He lay in the snow.

With hands and feet tied he had no chance to run this time. His only chance was to play 'possum. He listened, fighting an almost irresistible desire to sneeze. Thuds and slithering metallic noises came from nearby, noises whose import he did not at once grasp. But a vague terror gripped him. Cautiously, he rolled over a little and began working with desperate frenzy at his bonds.

"Hurry it up, you birds," Husky Voice growled, just above him. "That fresh stuff is coming."

"Ah-h, keep your shirt on! This stuff is hard digging," snarled a man whose voice was also vaguely familiar. He coughed, "Damn the gas! . . . This concrete was soft at five."

Then Gardner knew, and his blood ran like ice water. They were digging out the top of the cupola foundation.

Into that hole they would thrust him and cover him with fresh concrete! A cold sweat leaped to his forehead. A hand prodded him suddenly, shook him. He forced himself to lie limply.

"Like a rag," said husky voice.

A truck chugged up, swung around and backed up. "Ain't yuh guys ready yet," asked the driver with an oath.

"Shut up," said Husky Voice. "All right men, grab him!"

"Drive a pick into his brain first, boss!" said the deep-voiced man.

A hateful pause followed, a rustling of clothes as some one bent over him. Gardner almost yelled.

"Hm-m . . . Blood would show," the boss decided. "Dump the meddling fool in. He can't get away. If the concrete doesn't smother him, the gas'll get 'im!"

Gardner lay in an agony of indecision. They had probably killed or stunned Old Jonas. There would be no one else in this deserted area. In desperation he tried to plan. Even if that slimy mass of concrete did not suffocate him, these murderers would replace the tarp. If he got his head above the concrete, he would breathe in that deadly coke gas. He would die as had young Thorpe!

Only a superhuman effort of will choked back the yell for help when rude hands seized him. Without ceremony, they dumped him into a hole about three feet deep. He slumped to his knees, listening to the wood ramp protesting under the weight of the truck. The worm gear whined as the truck body came up.

At a faint thump, Gardner cautiously twisted his head. He could see the lower part of a man's overalls on the edge of the form. His flesh crawled in momentary expectation of the murderous pick. It was an anxious moment. The man gave a jeering laugh. "All right, Mister Inspector. There's plenty of cement in this batch to suit even you. You won't kick about this foundation!"

His laughter was lost in the sudden slump of concrete. It flattened

down the helpless man and drove the breath from his body. But, as that slimy mass gathered around him, Gardner *knew* who that man was!

There were two tons of concrete in that cubic yard, but fortunately it did not come all at once and it was mixed extremely wet. Gardner fought the instinct to raise up as it rose swiftly and covered his bowed head. The sharp, slimy stuff worked under his eyelids and into the corners of his mouth.

Once, a mile runner in college, he had been able to hold his breath nearly three minutes. He wondered if he could do it again. Three minutes to fill that hole; to smooth it off as before; to yank back the tarpaulin! Not much time. Gardner gritted his teeth, resolved to hold on to the uttermost. Meanwhile, he worked with the frenzy of despair at his bonds. Wet now, the leather seemed to give.

There was a steady roaring in his ears. He wondered what they were doing. Wondered, crazily, if he were losing his mind when he found himself hoping that the cement would not ruin his watch. He knew that the cement would not set up for fifteen minutes but suppose, he speculated wildly, he were too weak to raise himself. His muscles, already, seemed palsied. For a dread space of eternity, he saw himself collapsing; he visioned himself a part of a structure which would endure centuries. What irony!

He lost all track of time. An iron hand gripped his chest as his tortured lungs screamed for air. He knew that he could not hold out much longer; that he must save his strength against the time when he must fight his way out from beneath that death bringing tarpaulin. Yet he held on. Then, when he could stand it no longer, he rose up. Opened smarting eyes. It was black as pitch.

Even then, his reeling senses bade him draw in air with caution. It was noxious and it rushed warmly past his streaming face, but it was air. Not all bad, either. Then he saw why. He

saw a faint crack of light. He had come up directly beneath the junction between two sections of tarps.

Thrusting his nose through the crack he breathed greedily of the life-giving air. He felt stronger at once. Giving a tremendous tug, his hands separated. Waited a moment longer with ear against the canvas. All was still outside. He found his pocket knife and ripped his way out. Crawled out, a sodden, freezing figure, and lay panting like a sick dog.

A SATURDAY afternoon quiet pervaded the job office the following day when Gardner entered it at two o'clock. Neither Drew nor Slemmins were in their offices. Emerson's door was slightly ajar. Gardner stole down the passage and listened to a council of war being held within. Tim Egan had just said something which was interrupted by a protest from Jane Thorpe and a rumble from Thomas McGann. Tim Egan went on.

"Shure, I can't belave it nayther, sorr. 'Tain't like Mистер Gardner to use a shillaly on a pore old feller like Jonas. Course, we found his hat nearby, but—"

"What of it?" Emerson barked. "Jonas lied or is seeing things. He's deaf anyway. I figure Jimmy's come to a bad end—"

"Not so bad, Ray," Gardner said, stepping inside. Every one in that office sprang to his feet with a cry of astonishment. Jane Thorpe looked at his bruised face with concern in her brown eyes. Gardner smiled at her, but he locked the door, pocketed the key, and held up his hand. For a moment there was an electric silence as his gray eyes bore into the face of each man in the room.

Then, deliberately, he reached into his coat and held up a pair of handcuffs. Grinned slightly. "I have others," he said significantly. His stare fastened on the agent. "Slemmins, put out your hands!"

Slemmins wore a bandage around the middle finger of his right hand

but that hand went to his coat pocket. Gardner seized his wrist and twisted. Slemmins struggled and yelled, but he was helpless in that iron grip. In a moment Gardner had clicked on the manacles and had taken an automatic from Slemmins' pocket.

"I always carry a gun, but I was after my handkerchief," Slemmins snarled with an oath.

The detective slapped his mouth. "There's a lady here," he said gently. "You'll take a long count for theft and attempted murder, Mr. Slemmins."

Unmindful of Slemmins' ragings, Gardner turned and stared hard at Tim Egan. The foreman was white about the mouth. Came slowly to his feet as Gardner drew near. "No rough stuff, Ed. You did yours last night!" Gardner warned.

But Egan made a savage pass at Gardner's jaw. The detective ducked it and let him have it on the chin. It smacked solidly and the foreman went down like a poled ox. Drew grinned reminiscently and helped prop the limp man against the wall while Gardner slipped on the handcuffs.

"That," Gardner chuckled, "sort of squares this lump on my head from that blackjack. Or was it you, Slemmins?"

"Why drag me in, Hawkshaw?" Slemmins snarled.

"One reason, because my teeth marks are on that finger. I thought it was you who called me a 'Hawkshaw' last night, but I wasn't dead sure at first. That cold, you know. I spent the morning in our downtown office and at the Amico Cement Co. In November you bought six thousand barrels of cement on a blanket order, but *McGann was billed for nine!*" Emerson let out a whoop.

"That don't touch me!"

"Purchasing agents," Gardner went on sunnily, "are welcome visitors to concerns selling to them. Easy to snitch a few blank invoices; easy to open accounts in several banks in

order to cash the checks covering those fake invoices. Ray, you were pretty careless there: signing two checks to the same firms in the same months. But your mind has been too full of the job itself. You need a helper."

"He'll get one," McGann rumbled. "Boy, you've found it."

"Wait," Gardner grinned. "Aleck, I owe you an apology for that first day. I had a hunch that the stealing was in your department; thought, naturally, it was you. Your fault at that. Perkins slipped it over you because you were busy showing people what a big man you are."

"You're dead right," Drew said mournfully. "I'm willing to take my medicine."

"You ain't got a thing on me, you damn tinhorn detective," Tim Egan raged, coming to life. "You can't prove nothin'. Take—"

"You're forgetting your Irish brogue again, Timmy," Gardner laughed. "Like you did last night when you and your cheap crooks were about to cover me with fresh concrete!"

"Jimmy!" wailed Jane Thorpe.

Gardner shot her a grin, but went on implacably. "You're hung by your own knot, Egan. You killed Johnny Thorpe!"

"I didn't!"

"You hired fictitious men and Perkins made out their time. Johnny got wise to it. I saw the entries in the payroll book last night before your thugs jumped me. I already suspected your part and set you to worrying by kidding you about the number of men. You or Slemmins looked up my name and found out that I was a detective. I can prove that you and Perkins glommed the fake pay envelopes."

"That's a damn dirty lie," Egan screamed. "Anyway—"

"Yes, it does. You killed Johnny when he got suspicious. You threw him into that hole, then tied a different knot in the ropes because you

had tied the others—to shift the blame. How do I know? Because you kneeled down to tie it. I see a clumsy sewing of a three-cornered tear in the knee of your overalls. I saw it last night when you stood beside me on the cupola foundation. And, under the top snow where Johnny Thorpe met his death, I found *the print of that knee in the mud!*"

At this damning evidence Egan's eyes rolled and his mouth became slack and drooling. "I didn't mean to kill him! We quarreled! The gas killed

him!" he panted. "Slemmins, I told you we oughta beat—"

"Shut up, you fool!"

"Call the cops, Ray," Gardner said quietly.

The police had come and gone with their prisoners. Ray Emerson rubbed his jaw as the others congratulated the detective.

"Say-y, Jimmy. When did you see the print of Egan's knee in the mud. Edwards', I mean. I didn't see it."

"Neither did I," chuckled Jimmy Gardner.



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Seamstress to Satan

By Eric Lennox

Author of "Double-Cross Getaway," etc.

Malthus was counting on those little skeins of white thread, sewn by the pretty hands of a girl, as a bloody skein that would help him bilk her of a fortune. But he didn't know that those white threads could draw blood from the wrong victim.



MALTHUS was handsome, without doubt; handsome in a weak sort of way, which was why the women liked him. There was a little sweat now on his well-modeled face;

his shifty little eyes darted around the office, awestruck.

He hadn't expected to find Joe Ringler's place as sumptuous as this. Rich mahogany desk, thick, soft carpet, expensive pictures—even if they were a bit loud.

Ringler, massive, wide-shouldered, with a little thatch of red hair, a battered nose and a square chin, sat behind the desk and scowled, barked, "Well, talk up. Mike Larsen told me you had a proposition. Say your piece." There was an edge of contempt in his voice.

Malthus wet his lips. "Sure, Mr. Ringler." He tried a weak grin. "I—I was just a little surprised—"

"—To see Joe Ringler in a layout like this? Why not? Suppose I got a rep as a tough guy—can't I live like a gentleman? All right, never mind," as he saw Malthus groping for conciliating words. "I'm busy. What's the proposition—you want somebody knocked off?"

Malthus nodded. He rubbed his hands together nervously.

"Who?" Ringler rapped the question at him.

"I—I don't know his name."

Ringler started to laugh, then stopped abruptly. He half rose. "Listen, you. If you're trying to pull comedy—"

Malthus put out his hand. "No, no! I tell you, Mr. Ringler, I don't know his name. But he's a cinch, and there's plenty dough in it for both of us!"

Ringler subsided, looking at him queerly. He shrugged. "All right, give us the low-down."

Malthus talked eagerly. "I know a woman. She's—in love with me."

The big man said scornfully. "Yeah. She would be. That's how you make your living, ain't it? Just a gigolo, huh?"

"If you want to put it that way."

Ringler shrugged. "O k a y, go ahead. I just wanted to get you placed."

Malthus went on. "This girl is a singer. She's been going around with a certain criminal—a big shot. He recently pulled a heavy job—about two hundred thousand dollars in cold cash, and he gave her the money to hide for him."

Ringler leaned forward. "Two hundred G's, huh? So what?"

Malthus smiled. "I told you this was a big deal. Well, as I said, this girl is in love with me in a big way. She wants to take this dough, and go places with me. But she's afraid of what this big shot will do. She says

he'll follow us to the ends of the earth." He stopped and looked at the other as if he had explained everything.

"So," said Ringler, "the idea is to knock off this big shot, so the girl will feel safe to go away with you!"

Malthus squirmed. "Well, not exactly. I'm not interested in going away. My idea is, if this guy is bumped, she'll go get the dough from wherever it's hidden, and then we can take it away from her—you and I. A hundred thousand apiece!"

"Not a bad stunt," said Ringler, reflectively. "But how do you figure to knock off this big shot, if you don't know who he is?"

"That's easy. She's never told me his name. But he was in her house today; he came while I was there, and I had to lay low in the kitchen. And while he was there, he happened to rip his coat, and she sewed it up for him—with *white thread*! I heard her tell him she had no other thread. And she said it was too bad, because he'd have to wear it that way all day, since he wasn't going home till tonight. And then they made a date for him to

come back this evening at seven o'clock. So there you are—you lay for a guy whose coat is sewed with white thread! He is all marked for you!"

Ringler said, "It's certainly a swell lay."

"You'll do it? You won't pass it up?"

Ringler stood up. "What's the address?"

"Four-eighty-six Snider Street."

"I'll be there."

Malthus exclaimed eagerly, "Atta-boy. And we go fifty-fifty. Remember, the back of his coat is sewed with white thread."

Ringler said, "Yeah. White thread." He opened the drawer of his desk, took out a gun with a silencer attached. He pointed it at Malthus.

Malthus' eyes widened in dread as he saw the deadly purpose of Ringler. He shouted, "Don't—"

His words were cut off by the thud of lead in his body.

Ringler put the gun down on the desk, and turned away. As he did so, there showed on the back of his coat a long rip that had been sewed with white thread.



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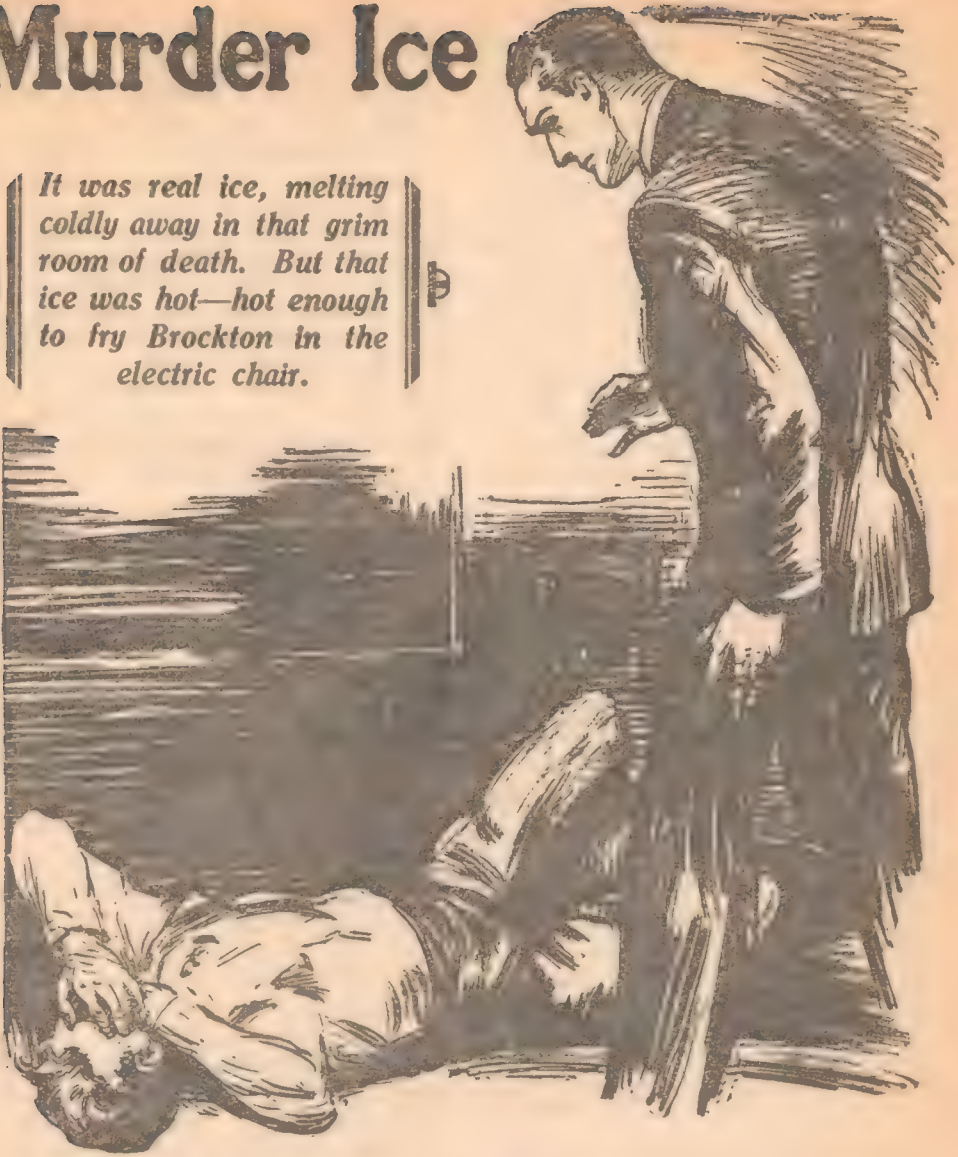
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Murder Ice

It was real ice, melting coldly away in that grim room of death. But that ice was hot—hot enough to fry Brockton in the electric chair.



By S. J. Bailey

THE thundering assault on Brockton's door sent cold fingers of fear clutching at his already thumping heart. He knew instinctively that it was Mrs. Forman, his landlady, and his occupation at the moment was such that he could not afford to be discovered. He was standing in the middle of his room, watch in hand, measuring with chronoscopic exactitude the melting time of one lone ice cube, lately from the

freezing tray of Mrs. Forman's refrigerator.

To have the old hawk-nose enter now and find the chair up on the trunk and the books up on the chair, would not be so bad. But to have her discover the odd position of the ice cube he had stolen would be disastrous. He would then be unable to use the clever stunt he had devised for providing himself with a perfect alibi when he killed John Pendleton.

He had chosen Pendleton as his victim for very good reasons. First, Pendleton carried a twenty thousand dollar policy with Independent Mutual. Second, the beneficiary was Roger Ingham, a man over whom Brockton had sufficient hold to make him pay off when the time came. And third, Pendleton was an old man, which made him easier to handle when it came to wielding the death blow.

The pounding on the door was resumed. A woman's irate voice vibrated through the thin panel. "Mr. Brockton," bawled the voice, "I'm tellin' ye to open up. Have done with yer stallin', man. I know ye're behind that door."

Brockton's thin lips curled and his black eyes blazed. He hated her for a snooping witch. She was always prowling through the halls, hawklike beak to the wind for some bit of scandal about one of her roomers.

Was it possible that she had spied on him when he sneaked into the kitchen a few minutes ago and extracted the cube from the ice tray? He stood rooted to the spot while his brain drove this thought ruthlessly through the sieve of logic.

"Just a minute, Mrs. Forman," he found himself calling out, amazed at the ease with which he threw a tired, yawning sound into his voice, "I'll be with you as soon as I hop into my pants."

That would hold her for a minute, until he could—

A sudden, faint cracking sound drove Brockton to action. He glanced hurriedly at the second hand of his watch, then leaped toward the pile of books and furniture.

He'd have to undo that tangle with nimble fingers, for the ice cube had almost melted away. In another few seconds the whole mess would come toppling down and make an awful noise.

There was no time to survey the cleverness of the arrangement by which he would not only alibi him-

self but make cold-blooded murder look as if a tragic accident had overtaken a kindly, monklike old man.

The straight-back chair was carefully balanced on the trunk, one leg extending over the edge, so that the least pressure forward would send it toppling to the floor. A pile of heavy books stood on its seat. The ice cube was resting under the forward edge of the lowest book, thus tilting the pile against the back of the chair. The melting cube had caused the pile of books to lean forward gradually. At the moment Brockton seized them, their center of gravity had moved forward to the point where the chair was already toppling.

"Phew!" he muttered. "That was close." With a few deft movements, he set the room in order. He mussed his hair and twisted one strap of his suspenders. As he pulled open the door to admit Mrs. Forman, he was lazily occupied with straightening the strap over his shoulder. He tried to look sleep-dazed.

MRS. FORMAN stomped into the room, her eyes darting to right and left, her jaw quivering angrily. "Mr. Brockton," she stated, eyeing him accusingly, "I think I'll be applying to your company for insurance on me pantry, that's what!"

Brockton suddenly felt himself suffocating. She *had* seen him go to the refrigerator!

"You forget I'm cashier for a life insurance company, Mrs. Forman," he was startled to find the words dropping so smoothly from his tongue. "We don't handle that kind of insurance."

"Ye're a brazen young man, that y're," continued Mrs. Forman, brushing a straggling wisp of lead-gray hair from her eyes. "Don't think I didn't see ye sneak into the kitchen. And there's a cold leg of chicken missing. What have ye done with the bones? Come now, own up, man!"

The relief of it made Brockton

weak in the knees. He scarcely heard himself mildly protesting his innocence. She had not missed the ice cube. His plans were safe from her prying nose.

Vaguely he realized that she was examining his waste basket. Then she threatened to dispossess him if she ever caught him sneaking in the kitchen again. She delivered a parting shot that grimly amused him: "And there's a wet spot on the seat of that chair. Be more careful, Mr. Brockton, about spilling water on the furniture. It ruins the finish."

Unstinted admiration for his own cleverness welled up inside Brockton's chest as the door slammed on her retreating figure. An expression of cunning satisfaction wreathed his face.

Tomorrow was Saturday. As usual, Pendleton would visit Ingham at the latter's country place for their weekly game of pinochle. Doctor Blake, a reputable physician, would also be there—maybe one or two others. Brockton would drop in for dinner, explaining that one of the policyholders, a Mrs. Denton who lived in that neighborhood, had died and he had come out to have the death-claim papers completed. This, of course, was literally true, and a fine break for Brockton, because it gave him an excuse to be carrying death-claim papers in his pocket.

After dinner, Pendleton would go to his room immediately, as was his habit, to take medicine for his heart. That would be Brockton's cue to slip upstairs through the back way, kill Pendleton, and arrange for his trick accident. He would then rejoin the others, who would be waiting in the library, anxious to get on with their game. When the crash came, there would be three or four reputable witnesses to swear, if it ever became necessary, that he was with them at the time of the tragic accident upstairs.

A pleasant glow spread through Brockton's body as he reviewed these details. He felt sorry for blundering

criminals who planned clumsy killings such as he had read of in newspapers and magazines. Why, if a man had brains and thought things out carefully ahead of time, it was easy enough to get away, literally, with murder. . . .

The following evening, he found himself standing at the window of Ingham's dining room, staring out into the night. Behind him, on the other side of a table which glistened with silver and white napery, stood Pendleton and Roger Ingham, chatting amiably over a small liquor cabinet on which Ingham was preparing drinks.

Brockton's fingers itched and curled. The prospect of sitting calmly through an entire meal suffocated him. He wanted to leap across the room and throttle that benign expression from Pendleton's good-natured, chubby face.

A slight noise at the door announced the arrival of Doctor Blake. Brockton, glancing back over his shoulder, witnessed Blake's entrance with thin-lipped distaste. The doctor's piercing eyes were like twin ferrets. Brockton hoped his deadly purpose would not be visible to those keen eyes as they rested on him during dinner.

Ingham hastened to offer Blake a drink.

"My old favorite!" cried Doctor Blake, reaching avidly for a brimming, icy-filmed glass.

"Mint juleps!" relished Pendleton laughingly.

Ingham held his glass to the light, squinted through the green fluid appreciatively. "Yes, sir, in my humble opinion—the best thirst quencher."

He paused, glanced across the room at Brockton. "How about it, old man?"

Brockton frowned, shook his head. They knew he hated mint juleps. Ingham was being polite, damn him. There were times when an ordinary show of politeness was like a slap in the face. Brockton turned his

back on them and glared out the window.

He felt the keen gaze of Doctor Blake, staring across the room, over the rim of his glass. He knew there were fine lines of bleak curiosity on Blake's forehead. Neither Blake nor Pendleton knew of the hold Brockton had over their host, Ingham, a hold that gave him entrance to Ingham's home whenever he felt so inclined.

They found their places around the table. Mrs. Hankin, Ingham's only servant, came in with a loaded tray. Doctor Blake, shaking out his napkin, observed: "Too bad about old Mrs. Denton."

"Died rather suddenly, didn't she?" inquired Ingham.

"Pneumonia—went like that," Doctor Blake snapped his fingers, then looked at Brockton. "By the way, aren't you connected with the insurance company that had a policy on her? Seems to me her daughter said something—"

"Independent Mutual," supplied Brockton tersely. "Yes, I'm their cashier. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons I came down here this week-end was to get the death papers filled out on Mrs. Denton." His hand slipped unconsciously under his coat to see if the papers were all right.

DINNER dragged to an end at last. Brockton wondered how he had been able to keep his nerves in hand. He'd come near bending his dessert spoon in a powerful hand that tensed and shook as he tried to finish his meal calmly. To Brockton, with murder in his heart, there was entirely too much good fellowship among these three. He not only felt out of place socially but entirely out of tune with them in every other way. This, coupled with the fact that one of them was to be his victim, combined to grind his nerves to a fine edge.

They rose and separated, to meet later in the library for pinochle. Brockton saw Pendleton head for the front stairway. He knew the others

would not follow, tactfully respecting his desire to take his medicine in private.

Ingham passed down the hall toward the library. He was alone. Brockton caught up with him, grasped his arm.

"Look here, Ingham," he mouthed softly. "I'm nine thousand behind in my accounts at Independent Mutual. You've got to come across. I—"

"Brockton," said Ingham, an indescribable loathing in his tones, "you've blackmailed me for that Westervale deal for the last time. I was a fool to ever get started on that tack with you. Now, you've bled me dry. I've no more money. Go ahead, expose me."

Brockton's sinuous fingers sank into the fleshy part of Ingham's forearm. "One thing you don't do is lie, Ingham. You're probably dry like you say. But if you get money, you're coming across, see? For instance, if Pendleton's heart should give out—and he's old enough—you'll reap twenty grand, with no questions. Get me?"

Brockton could see the utter contempt in Ingham's eyes. His fingers loosened. They stared at one another for a moment. Then Ingham swung round abruptly and stalked into the library.

Brockton shrugged, grinned malevolently in the dark. He stepped out onto the veranda where he paused long enough to make a show of lighting a cigarette. He took a deep drag and dropped the butt, grinding it out under his heel. His jaw hardened. The moment had arrived.

Assured that no one had observed him, he slipped off the veranda, sped lightly around to where his car was parked. He extracted a heavy tire iron from under the front seat and ran up the back steps of the house, his heart hammering, his breath breaking from his throat with a peculiar rasping sound.

The kitchen was in darkness, for Mrs. Hankin had been told to leave

TSD

the dishes for morning and go home. Brockton felt his way to the electric refrigerator and extracted an ice cube from the rubber tray. Then he cautiously mounted the rear stairway.

The door of Pendleton's room lay ajar, and a subdued light emanated from within. Brockton, cat-footing across the threshold, saw Pendleton leaning over the bed, back toward him, pawing through his suitcase.

The light came from a soft-shaded bulb in a low reading lamp beside an easy chair, close to the fireplace. Another chair stood at the head of the bed. A large trunk and a bookcase occupied the opposite side of the room. The dim light suited his purpose nicely.

He shifted the ice cube to his left hand, raised the tire iron and took a careful step forward.

A strange exultation seized him. In a moment, the most ticklish part of his scheme would be accomplished. He felt nothing but hate for the monklike little man whose life he was about to take.

He was halfway across the room when icy fingers suddenly touched his spine, sending a queer, tingling sensation up and down his back. Pendleton had sensed his presence! The little man whirled, his eyes dilating wildly at sight of the ugly weapon which Brockton had no time to hide.

For a split second Brockton wavered. Some ageless, imperishable quality in Pendleton's face unnerved him. But he thrust the disquieting sensation aside.

The wells of his nose swelled, and a single oath ripped through his thin lips. He flicked the ice cube onto the bed, and even as it described its flashing arc, his left fist came up clenched and met Pendleton's sagging jaw.

The old man collapsed across the bed. Brockton roughly rolled him over, brought the tire iron down with a muffled crack against the base of his skull. He put plenty of force behind the iron, for his plan depended

on this single, neatly dispatched death blow.

He worked with methodic haste now. He placed the small chair on the trunk, one front leg overhanging in air. He held the chair with one hand and pulled books from the case with the other, piling them on the chair so that it no longer had a tendency to tip over. Then he slipped the ice cube under the forward edge of the books, placing another book in front of it to keep it from slipping out of place.

He glanced up at the high shelves above the trunk. There were some more books up there. Good. Another little touch now and—

Swiftly Brockton carried the dead man over and raised him up so that two of his fingers plowed into the thick dust on the high shelf. Satisfied now that he had left sufficient mute testimony of a tragic accident, Brockton stretched the body on the floor in front of the fireplace, rubbing the back of the head in the soot close to the sharp brick corner. Blood had begun to clot in the sparse gray hair.

BROCKTON nodded, surveyed the room carefully. A tumbler, half full of water, stood on the mantle. Pendleton's medicine, most likely. Brockton poured it out on the floor directly under the chair that held the dripping ice cube, setting the glass on its side and grinding his heel into it to crack it open. That would explain the moisture from the ice cube.

Then he carefully adjusted the top book on the pile, until the chair was so balanced that it was almost ready to tip. He knew from his experiment the night before that it would take about ten minutes for the ice cube to lower the books far enough to upset the balance of the chair.

He stood back to survey his work. He was close to the dim lamp on the smoking stand, and a tiny triangle of white, just under his own chin, caught his attention. He swore. Those damned death-claim papers. They

were bulky and had a way of working up out of his pocket. He shoved them back in place.

A little more than a minute passed and Brockton was slipping out through the kitchen door, shoving the tire iron under the cushion of his car.

He found it difficult to breathe. He forced his scurrying feet to a more deliberate pace as he reached the veranda. He delayed on the steps, while he strove to quiet the heaving of his chest.

A deep sense of cold satisfaction pervaded him. The job had gone through perfectly. The final act would take care of itself. All he had to do was sit tight and react before the others in accordance with the cues he himself had provided.

Already he saw his accounts balanced and a few thousand extra to play with. It would be easy enough to squeeze the death-claim money out of Ingham. That Westervale deal would put Ingham in jail if he did not come across. Brockton smiled with malevolent anticipation as he envisioned Ingham paying him off. Then his smile changed to one of keen appreciation of his own cleverness in hatching out this clever, air-tight scheme for procuring the money he needed.

He joined Ingham and Blake in the library, yawned carelessly and dropped into a chair before the card table.

Ingham glanced nervously toward the door. "What the devil d'you suppose is keeping Pendleton?" He looked at Doctor Blake for answer.

Blake shrugged good-naturedly. "Don't worry. He'll be here directly."

"If we don't get this game started soon, I'll—" Ingham bit off the sentence and stared at the doctor. "What was that? Did you hear it?"

The floor overhead vibrated slightly as a short series of muffled thumps reached their ears. Doctor Blake nodded, half rose, then sat back. "Yes, I

heard it. I guess he dropped something."

"Dropped something is right," called Ingham over his shoulder. He was halfway to the door. "I'm going up and see what's happened."

Brockton rose and followed. "Sounded like something pretty heavy to me," he said.

Doctor Blake threw down the deck of cards he had been shuffling and trailed along.

The three men arrived at the door of Pendleton's room, filed inside. There was a rending catch in Ingham's voice. "Pen, old man!" He knelt by the silent form: "Pen, old man, what's happened?"

Doctor Blake turned swiftly to Brockton. "My case—in my room—quickly, man!"

Brockton obeyed without question.

A FEW MINUTES LATER Doctor Blake rose slowly from his examination shaking his head. Ingham stood at the foot of the bed, leaning weakly against it. Blake addressed Brockton. "Take Ingham downstairs," he said. "Neither of you can help me. I want to make a further examination."

Brockton, in spite of himself, did not find visual feast in the ugly sight. He was relieved at the chance to escape. He took Ingham by the arm and led him downstairs. Ingham dropped wordlessly into a chair at the card table and nervously fumbled with a pack of cigarettes, pulling them out one by one and ripping them to bits. Brockton drew a chair up to the sturdy library table close by, pulled the death papers from his pocket and began to fill them in.

His pen hand moved shakily across the paper. He was glad Ingham was not watching him. With an effort he steadied his hand. Excitement seethed within him. There had been no hitch. Blake would find nothing—nothing save evidence of a regrettable accident. Exultation soared inside Brock-

ton. Who said there was no such thing as a perfect murder?

He looked up, addressed Ingham: "You've known Pendleton just eleven years, is that right?"

Ingham started out of his reverie, blinked. "Eh? What's that?"

Brockton repeated his question.

Ingham's brow clouded darkly. "Damn you!" he cried. "Do you think I'm going to help you fill in death-loss papers at a time like this? Why, Pen and I have been—" His voice broke suddenly. He recovered himself and stared queerly at Brockton. "Why—why, if you hadn't been right here in this room when we heard that noise, I'd almost think you—"

Brockton sneered. "Well, I was right here, as it happens. And as far as these papers are concerned, you forget I'm a representative of the insurance company. I was going to use these papers for Mrs. Denton's death claim, but I'm doing you the favor of using them for Pendleton. You see, I want—" he lowered his voice—"to get quick action up in the claim department." He did not add that he was momentarily expecting a visit from the home office auditor and wanted to cover his shortage as quickly as possible.

There was a slight sound at the doorway. Doctor Blake came in. "What have we here?" he inquired.

Brockton looked down at the papers, selected one of them and handed it to the doctor. "This is your end of it, doctor. The attending physician's certificate. As soon as you fill this paper out we'll have all the papers necessary for my company except the transcript of death. That is, the photostatic copy of the county bureau of vital statistics."

Doctor Blake took the paper without a word, looked it over carefully. "Pardon me, I want to get my fountain pen." He stepped out into the hall, returning in a moment. Brockton noticed that his pocket bulged slightly, but thought nothing of it beyond assuming that the doc-

tor had carelessly shoved his stethoscope into it.

"Transcript of death, I believe you said?" Doctor Blake had taken up a position some ten feet from where Brockton sat. He held up the paper Brockton had given him. He continued quietly. "I think you're mistaken, Brockton. Transcript of *murder* would be more like it."

Chill fingers of fear poked around Brockton's heart. Had Blake found out something after all? For breathless seconds he stared at Blake. Then his alert brain drove the panic from his mind. His fingers, clutching the papers in front of him, quickly relaxed. This canny old doctor imagined himself a sleuth. He was testing some fool theory. But he wasn't catching Brockton in any hasty admission. For Brockton *knew* he had a perfect alibi.

"In other words," continued Blake, "this is a case for the police."

"What the devil are you driving at, Blake?" inquired Ingham. "If this is a joke, I'd say it's in mighty poor taste."

"Blake would like to imagine himself a detective," suggested Brockton, grinning derisively. "He's rambling on now, to hear himself talk."

DOCTOR BLAKE waved the paper in his hand. "Pendleton was murdered," he stated. "I'll tell you how. The murderer placed an ice cube in a strategic position, so that it would topple furniture to make a noise, fixing the time of the murder at the moment when the murderer was safely alibied." He pointed a steady finger at Brockton. "You killed Pendleton!"

Ingham sprang up. "Brockton! You *did* kill him, after all!"

Brockton snarled, half rose. "Nonsense! Blake hasn't a thing on me. Can't you see, he's worked out some fool scheme and is bluffing us both along."

Blake continued, unruffled: "You made one mistake, Brockton, when you worked in the dark. The dark-

ness queered you." He turned to Ingham. "Listen, your housekeeper, Mrs. Hankin, has a habit of preparing specially frozen ice cubes for your mint juleps. If Brockton had taken a friendly drink with us before dinner tonight, he'd have noticed that the ice cubes were green! Yes, green! Why? . . . Because Mrs. Hankin mixes a concentrated mint flavoring and coloring matter with the water when she fills the trays."

Retreating panic wheeled and re-attacked Brockton, driving his brain into utter confusion. He could not frame a single coherent sentence. He sat stunned, staring up at Blake, his jaw wobbling inanely.

Blake went on: "There is a very slight green stain on Pendleton's bed where the cube must have rested a short time. There is a larger green stain on the tapestry covering the trunk. And there is a light-green stain in the shape of a fingerprint on this certificate you handed me to fill out. A stain which got there, I suppose, when you reached in your hand, wet from the ice cube, to make sure the papers which were so important

to your murder scheme, were safe. I don't know just how. . . ."

Brockton jumped up, overthrowing the card table. He bellowed in rage as he struck at Blake—then found out what had really caused the bulge in Blake's pocket. There was a sharp report and Brockton clutched at his shoulder, Blake had whipped out a small .32 and fired without warning.

"I guess that'll hold you till we get the police." Blake turned to Ingham. "I borrowed this from your trophy case in the hall. I was almost afraid to use it, you know how relics are, but—well, that's that." He held the gun in one hand, lighted his pipe with the other and made himself comfortable in an easy chair, keeping an eye on Brockton. "If you'll call the police—" he suggested gently to the speechless Ingham.

Brockton sat down heavily, wearily. A fleeting, annoying thought played unholy tag in his mind. If he had only accepted the drink when they offered it in spirit of good fellowship, he wouldn't have made the one mistake which turned the transcript of death into a transcript of murder.

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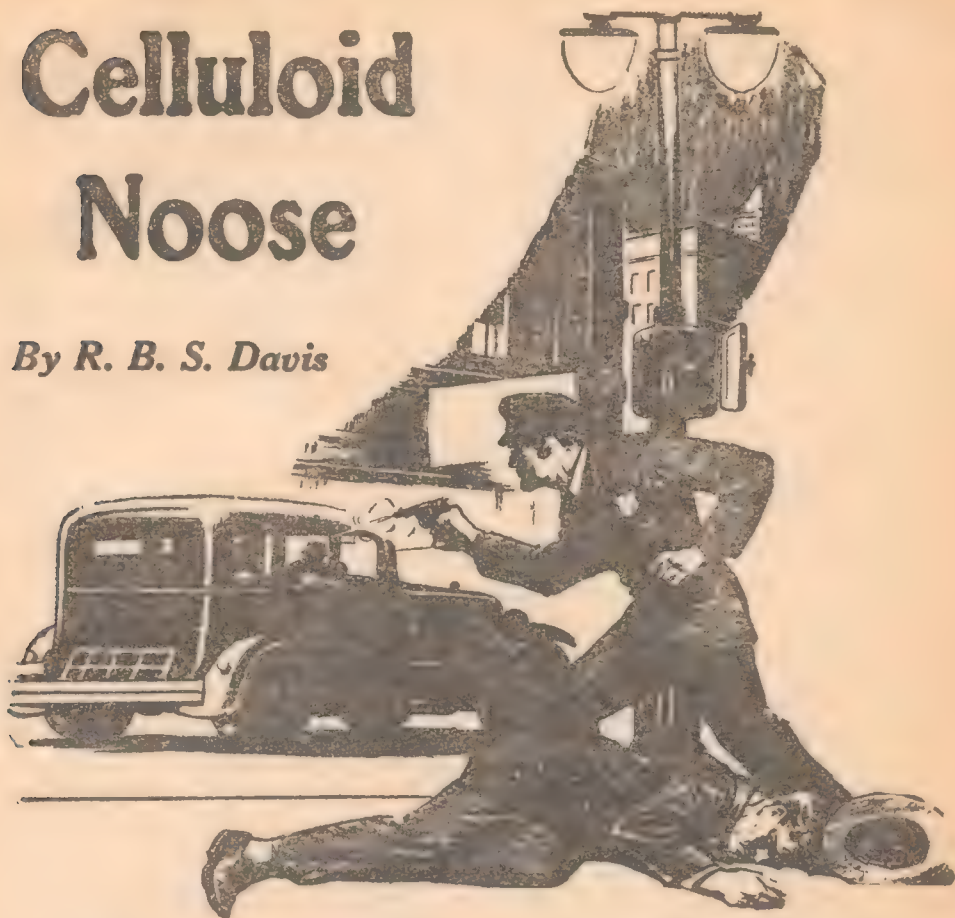


OUT NOW

Mac was only a stand-in for a tough gangster actor. But when he found himself playing a gangster role in real life, he knew that the only way he could get out of it alive was with a . . .

Celluloid Noose

By R. B. S. Davis



THE YELLOW PARROT in downtown Los Angeles is a large, square room—low-ceilinged, poorly ventilated and dirty. You can get half

drunk in the place for a quarter and plastered for fifty cents. Plenty of people do both—mostly the scabs and hangers-on of the picture industry. You'll see a lot of people there who look just like the movie stars who are right up there on top at the present moment. These

people are stand-ins and doubles out of work—like myself. I'm a double. That's how this guy happened to come up to me that night.

He was big, fat, red-faced, with black beetling eyebrows. He was dressed in evening clothes that weren't stolen studio property or rented from "Alonzo Your Tailor." He had two guys with him—two of the toughest looking monkeys in the world. They kept tugging at their wing collars and patting their dinner coats on the left side, just above the waist. The big fat guy stared at me with a puzzled expression for a moment, then opened his yap to speak. I interrupt-

ed him because I knew what he was going to say.

"No, I'm not Jimmy Cronin, the gangster actor. Yes, I know I look like him." I wagged my head up and down and gave the guy a sour smile. "I'm his double. Now, beat it." It made me sore to have those guys gaping at me all the time, and besides I was feeling pretty low that night.

The big guy made a grunting noise that could have passed for surprise. He pulled a chair away from the table and sank heavily into it, stuck a huge black cigar into his mouth and lit it. All the time he didn't take his eyes away from my face.

"Are you working right now?" he asked.

"If I were, I wouldn't be sitting in this stinking hole talking to you," I told him.

His face became serious—serious and ugly. In the sickly yellow light of the Parrot, it looked like the face of a freshly shaven gorilla. "Listen, brother," he told me evenly, "take the chip off your shoulder. It's easy as hell to start something with us, but it ain't so easy to finish it. I like polite guys, see?"

I DIDN'T say anything. I just kept looking at him. For the life of me, I couldn't place his type, and in Hollywood when you can't do that with a person, something is wrong. This guy wasn't pictures. That was plain. He had dough, but he wasn't any sucker looking for a chance to "angel" some producer. He was too smart-looking for that. Still, he had something on his mind. I waited.

After he'd given me a chance to mull over his last words, he spoke again. "I started to ask you, are you working?"

I shook my head negatively.

"That's better," he said. "Now, I got a job for you. A few days work and lots of do-re-mi." His tone implied that it was a foregone conclusion that I would accept whatever he offered. "You won't need any duds or

anything. You can come with me right now out to the place—the—what do you call it, Hammy?" He looked sideways at one of his stooges.

"De location," Hammy murmured with some show of pride.

"Yeah, the location. You got any family?"

I shook my head again. "What are you doing, making a picture?"

"Yeah. In a way I'm making a picture. I need a couple of guys with nerve, too. Not any of these pretty-faced guys. I need 'em with stomach. Now, do you—"

"If you're making a picture about gangsters, why don't you get Jimmy Cronin?" I cut in suspiciously. "I happen to know he's available right now."

The fat man slapped both hands down on the table and half rose to his feet. "I'm not here to waste time," he snapped. "Make up your mind and no questions."

Well, if I hadn't known that every legitimate picture company in the business was through with me, things might have been different. If there'd been even a ghost of a chance of my landing a studio job the next day—or any day after that—I'd have told this guy to go to hell because I didn't like the smell of him even then. But there wasn't.

Jimmy Cronin had been told that very day by American Pictures that he was through. His pictures for the last year and a half had flopped miserably, and there wasn't a producer in Hollywood who would touch him. And let me tell you, when a star flops, his double flops ten times as hard. The ex-star might land a few consolation parts from soft-hearted directors, but who the hell has any use for a has-been's double?

I told the fat guy to count me in. He told me he wanted another guy out of the crowd of bums in the Yellow Parrot to come along—somebody who knew something about cameras, etc.—who needed dough and didn't care how he got it. Just then Shorty

Griswold happened to be ambling by the table and his ears caught the word, "Dough."

"Dough?" he said. "Who said dough?" He grinned at me, then at the fat guy.

"Do you know anything about cameras?" the fat guy asked him.

"Know anything about them!" Shorty echoed. "I used to make 'em."

The fat guy looked at me. I nodded. Shorty edged nearer to the table. "What's up?" he asked.

The fat guy told him he had some work for us in the same fashion he'd told me—take it or leave it, etc. Shorty was only too glad to take it. And no questions. He'd made good money at one time as a picture technician until tough luck and drink put him on the skids. Almost anything sounded good to Shorty.

Without any more ado we followed our benefactor and his two stooges out into the street, climbed into a long black limousine and were off.

WE started out Figulora toward San Pedro, but after a while cut off to the left and headed east. The driver kept the car rolling at about sixty or seventy. Towns whipped past. It wasn't long before we got into really hilly country. I don't know how long we drove after that. All I know is that it was a hell of a long time. It must have been two or three in the morning when we pulled into this rancho, or whatever it was.

Shorty and I were taken to a small room in a low, squat, stuccoed building, and told to turn in. By this time, Shorty was getting curious, and I didn't blame him.

"What the hell is the play here, Mac? Is this pictures?"

"Never mind what it is," I told him. "You'll find out soon enough."

He did. The next morning we were roused out of bed about eight o'clock, given a feed and told to report to Jake. "Who's Jake?" we wanted to know.

Jake turned out to be the fat guy. We found him sitting out in the patio in front, surrounded by at least a dozen guys of the same calibre as the two who had accompanied him the night before. Jake gave us a merry, "Good morning," and the whole crowd of us walked across the roadway to a big barn.

Inside was a sound and camera truck of the type used for shooting moving scenes—speeding automobiles, galloping horsemen, etc. In it there were a lot of junk accessories such as film, developing materials, klieg lights, and sun reflectors. Three limousines, similar to the one we had come out in from Los Angeles were standing outside.

One of the men, upon an order from Jake, backed the truck out into the ranch yard. A few of the others hauled a bunch of sawed-off shotguns, Tommy-guns, and Luger pistols out of the limousines and began oiling them up and letting go with a few tentative bursts of fire at the barn walls. Shorty and I began to sweat. Jake came up to me and slapped a hand on my shoulder.

"My actors," he said waggishly. "Now, look, you guys. This picture is about a bank holdup. You're Jimmy Cronin." He jerked a thumb at me. "The famous bad guy of the movies. The barn door is the doorway of the bank. You ride up to it in one of the cars with the mob. All of you jump out of the car. You and a couple of other guys stand on the sidewalk and keep the crowd back if necessary. The rest jump into the bank, get the sugar, and bring it back to the car."

"The movie truck is right outside on the street, taking a picture of it all. When you and the boys jump into the car and start off, the sound truck follows, keeping the cameras trained on you all the time. Shorty, here, mans the camera. Get it?"

"I get it all right," I told him. And I did, all in a flash. I began to get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, too. "And after we've rehearsed it

long enough, we go back to Los Angeles and knock off a real bank. Isn't that it, Jake? The camera truck being there will allow you to do almost anything and get away with it without interference, won't it?

"Shoot down all the cops you want—all the women and children that get in the way—and everybody will just stand around and laugh. They'll think it's just a movie, and that the cops, falling down into the gutters and hanging onto their bellies, are just acting. They'll wonder how you get that wonderful effect of blood spilling all over the sidewalk. Oh, I'll say I get it, and I don't want any of it, thank you. Shorty and I'll just be going now."

It was a bluff, and I knew I couldn't get away with it, but I tried. I turned around and started to walk down the road away from the rancho. Shorty followed me. I could hear his teeth chattering. We got about twenty feet away when the dust in back of our heels began to spurt up with bullets. Then, when one knocked off my hat, I turned around.

JAKE was walking toward us, and so were four or five other guys, their guns pointing right at our middles.

"Holy smoke," Shorty breathed, "we sure got into something, Mac!"

Jake stopped a few feet away from us. "Now, if you guys are through with this act of yours, we'll start the real practice. I understand, boys, how you feel about your consciences and all that. But it ain't any use. So now that you done what you can to salve 'em, let's go."

"Suppose we refuse?" I asked.

Jake reached out and patted Hammy's Tommy-gun significantly, then grinned at us, amiably as a kitten. "We really need your pan in this, buddy. It'll make it look like the real stuff."

"And if we do play ball, we'll get it in the back anyway," I said.

Jake shrugged and turned away.

"And maybe you won't," he said. "Let's go."

They had rigged up the old battered klieg lights and a couple of sun reflectors in front of the barn door. Some heavy fire hose served as a fake for trunk lines with cables strung through them. They stretched these along the roadway and up into the sound truck, although the actual juice that was used came from a set of batteries inside the truck itself.

Some of the boys were dressed in riding boots, slacks, turtle-neck sweaters and berets. They were to arrive on the scene at the same time as the sound truck, get the hoses out, the lights placed, and ropes set up to keep the crowd back, etc. They went through their routine about half a dozen times before we even began ours. By that time they had it down so they could do it in almost nothing flat. Then we rehearsed the stickup. All I had to do was to stand around, look ugly, and wave an empty Luger pistol.

When the getaway started, the lights and the rest of the equipment were to be left behind. The two limousines would start off first, and then the sound truck close behind. The camera crane, with Shorty at the camera, would swing up and face him forward. He was to keep the camera trained on us all the time. I found a few unused reels of film in the sound truck and gave them to Shorty to put in the camera. It wasn't their idea to have him actually shoot these scenes, but I thought a record of them might come in handy.

"Take a few shots now," I told Shorty on the sly, "and save the rest till later."

We went through the whole routine a few more times, and it really began to look pretty good. Then we adjourned to the big front room of the ranch-house where Jake had a blueprint of the bank we were going to knock off. There was a lot of talk over this, a discussion about the place somewhere on the outskirts of Los

Angeles where we were to abandon the sound truck and the two limousines and pick up two other cars.

There was a lot of general talk about the whole setup and the amount of the dough they expected to haul. Jake gave Shorty and me a good talking-to and wound up by telling us that we'd better play our parts well because there'd be loaded guns trained upon us every second of the time.

Then we were given another feed, and Shorty and I were locked up in our little room again. It must have been three or four in the afternoon by this time.

Around nine, somebody handed another feed into us. We ate this, flopped down on the beds and dozed. I guess we slept for about four or five hours. Then Hammy came, unlocked the door and told us to come into the front room.

All of the boys were there, and every last man of them had a pint of whiskey in his fist, including our benefactor, Jake Kroll. Jake waved his hand at the almost empty case at his feet, and told us to treat ourselves to a pint. I glanced at the open door leading outdoors into the night, and the notion crossed my mind that I might make a bolt through it. But there were too many gun muzzles pointing in my direction. I helped my-

self to a pint, pulled out the cork. I saluted Jake with the pint, and said: "Here's to crime." Then I took a long drink.

"When we finish these up," Jake said, "then we'll start."

THE RIDE back to Los Angeles was altogether too short for me. The nearer we got to the city, the more jittery I got. Around seven-thirty in the morning we pulled into a deserted field somewhere in the vicinity of Burbank.

More pints were produced. We all had a few balls, and those of us who were supposed to be actors smeared greasepaint on our faces. It didn't seem like any time at all before Jake Kroll flicked aside his cigar butt and snapped: "Nine o'clock. Let's go."

My heart sank right down to my boots.

The car carrying the boys in the fancy get-up—the berets and all—went first. The sound truck followed them, and after that came our car, bristling with guns. The city was fully awake and going about its business when we rolled into it about half an hour later. I kept darting my eyes left and right, wondering when we were going to come to the bank we planned to knock off. I thought I might spot a cop and perhaps give him a signal, or something.



Of course, there wouldn't have been any use in it. I was squeezed into the back seat between Hammy and another plug, and they would have filled my guts full of lead in a second if I'd even made a peep. But then, there was no harm in hoping. Suddenly our driver slowed down to a stop.

I craned my neck to look ahead and saw the other limousine and the sound truck rounding a corner onto Fifth. I remembered that there was a big bank around there in the middle of the block. My stomach almost did a flop-over. I knew we were there.

I began to wonder about Shorty, poor old Shorty, sticking out like a sore thumb in the seat of that camera crane. If anybody started shooting at us, as we drove away after the stick-up, Shorty would be sure to get it. Poor little devil. He *did* have a wife and two little kids. Damn it! He shouldn't have gotten into this mess. But just then I had to stop thinking about him because our driver had started up again, and in about two shakes we'd all be in the thick of it.

We turned onto Fifth, and just ahead we could see the boys doing their chores with the klieg lights, the reflectors, etc. One man was walking across the street with the end of the fire hose. The first limousine was parked about a car-length away from the bank. The sound truck was parked right in front of the bank and out far enough from the curb to allow our car to ease in on the inside. I saw Shorty up in the crane, aiming his camera at the bank doors, and I saw Jake Kroll on the sidewalk giving orders to the rest of the boys.

Quite a few people had paused to watch the proceedings; but the boys had herded them back about thirty to thirty-five feet away from the bank and had set up ropes to keep them there. When our car came into sight, Jake and all the boys jumped over to their car. I heard Jake shout: "Camera!"

For some reason, when we finally

stopped at the curb and got out, my nervousness vanished. There was something so familiar about the whole damn thing—the lights, the crowds, and all. Maybe it was the murmur that went up from the crowd when they got a look at my pan. I really am a ringer for Jimmy Cronin.

I did realize then, however, how deeply into this thing I was. Now that I'd shown myself as a member of the gang, I'd have to stick with them until I could tip off the cops to them. Otherwise how could I prove myself innocent of a part in this crime? My word would be no good. I'd have to back it up.

We started out like clockwork, but then things began to happen. As we expected, the bank's burglar alarm went off first. This meant only a few seconds before a cop, or cops, would be on the scene. They would know the difference between a phony alarm and a real one. Next, some crazy goop of a clerk in the bank went loco, got by the boys inside somehow, and came dashing out onto the sidewalk. Hammy split his middle open with a gush of bullets from his Tommy-gun.

Then two cops appeared on the edge of the crowd to my left. One of them was trying to pull a gun, and the other was trying to stop him. They struggled for a moment; then the brave one broke through the ropes and began shooting. This just about broke up the party.

EVERYBODY in our gang except me began returning the fire. Apparently the marksmanship they had displayed at the rancho was just flash-in-the-pan, because their bullets were flying in all directions. Three or four people in the crowd were hit. Women screamed and fainted, men cursed and stampeded for shelter. The cop who had started it all was reduced to a bloody pulp in a few seconds.

This, mind you, was all taking place among the crowd on the sidewalk to my left. The crowd opposite them, to



my right, were still taking it all in as though they were comfortably parked in Grauman's Chinese Theater during a thirty-five cent matinee. Even when the screeching of sirens announced the coming of police cars, they didn't catch on. Jeez, you sure can fool all of the people some of the time!

Somehow, by some miracle, we got into the cars with the money and got started down the street. Kroll and his bunch in the first limousine and the sound truck next. I could see Shorty up in that crane. He was vomiting his heart out, and even from where I was in the limousine following the truck, I could see that his face was as green as a shamrock leaf. I wondered how much of this horrible shambles he

had been able to record on his film before he turned sick.

Two police cars were following us, pumping lead at the back of our car. Hammy stuck a fresh clip in his Tommy-gun, knocked the glass out of the back window and returned the fire. One of the other boys was shooting out the side. We took corners on two wheels, missing other cars by a hair's breadth.

It seemed to me to be only a question of seconds before our tires would be shot away, and I was right. But our shots got home to the police cars, too, sending one careening into a lamp post and stopping the other dead in its tracks. Some one in the sound truck saw our car jerk to a stop, saw

us pile out. The truck slowed up enough to allow us to scramble aboard; then we were off again.

I looked up at Shorty in the camera crane. Two bullets had entered his head right above his left eye. He was dead.

Somewhere on the outskirts of town, we pulled into a deserted lot where two new cars were waiting for us. In the scramble to get the money from the sound truck into the other cars, I snatched the used reel of film out of the camera and stuffed it under my coat. I found a couple of bottles of developing fluid, too, and I stuck those in my pocket. I don't know what I had in mind, but something told me these things might come in handy.

This whole business took only three or four minutes, and then we were on our way once more and breathing easier. That is, the gang were. I wasn't. I was just beginning to *really* sweat.

We half-circled the city and came back into it via the Brentwood-Hollywood route. By this time everybody was so much on edge they were ready to draw guns and shoot each other for nothing. It was a relief when we finally got to this apartment house and holed in. Everybody just flopped somewhere in a chair and stayed there.

About five o'clock that night it began to rain. Jake sent one of the boys out for some food and a case of booze. When the fellow came back with the stuff he also had a bunch of newspapers, some of them extras, with stories of the job splashed all over the front pages. I grabbed one and felt my heart sink when I saw my picture, big as life, smack in the middle of the page.

THE STORIES of the affair all ran about the same. They used words like "daring," "audacious," "heinous," etc. They told about my part in the crime—how completely my presence had fooled everybody. Read-

ing about it in the papers like that, I could hardly believe I had been present. That is until I came to the part where they told about finding Shorty's body and about the horror of Shorty's wife when they told her.

That hit me right down to my insides. I made up my mind to make it up to that woman as much as possible—at least to clear Shorty's name—if I lived to get the chance.

We had drinks all around and shot the breeze about the stuff in the papers. Then I asked Jake what he intended to do about me. He gave me a long look through half-closed eyes and pursed his lips.

"I don't know, brother," he said.

"Give me my cut of the dough, and I'll see you later," I said.

"You can't do that, Jake!" somebody jawed. "This guy's as hot as a baked potato! He'd be spotted anywhere. Look at his pitcher all over the papers!"

The others began to mumble and toss me dirty looks. A couple of them were for slitting my throat right on the spot and being done with it. I began to think my finish was getting pretty close when Hammy pointed to the bulge of my coat made by that reel of film. He wanted to know what it was. I told them.

"The reel?" Jake said. "Whatcha got that for?"

"It's a damn good thing for you and your pals that I did get it," I snapped. "If I hadn't, the police would have found it in the camera, and your maps as well as mine would have been plastered all over the papers. You guys sure are smart!"

"Okay, wise guy," Jake said. "Just for that we'll all have another drink like real pals. Tomorrow we may have to cut your heart out."

The apartment had two bedrooms. Half of us were to go to bed and sleep until morning; the other half had to stay up and keep an eye on things. I was in the shift that hit the hay first. My head had hardly touched the pil-

low before I dozed off. I was that poohed out. . . .

The next morning I told Jake I wanted to take a bath. I locked myself in the bathroom, turned on the shower. Then I dug the reel of film out of my pockets and the two bottles of developing material. I put the stopper in the washbowl and then poured into it what there was of the developing powder. I slowed up the flow of the shower and put the plug into the bathtub. Then I poured the fixing powder into the tub. I snapped out the light.

AS SOFTLY AS POSSIBLE I opened the reel. I fished out the roll of film and began drawing it through the fluid in the wash bowl. When I'd finished with this, I did the same with the fixing fluid in the tub. I had a pretty tough time stringing the film around the room in a fashion that would allow it to dry, but somehow I did it, and got it back into the can and under my coat again.

Then I doused my hair with water and combed it, taking care to leave it pretty wet and dripping so that it would look as though I'd just finished a shower. I unlocked the door and walked back into the front room.

The window shades were pulled down all through the apartment, and by this time the place was an awful mess. It was littered with cigar stubs, ashes, empty bottles and dirty coffee cups. A few of the boys had started a poker game. Nobody paid any attention to me. I sank into a chair beside the windows and pretended to read.

About two o'clock in the afternoon the second shift of sleepers came straggling out of the bedrooms, rubbing their tousled heads and staring at the card players with bleary eyes. One or two joined the game. The place began to smell strongly of body odor. I pulled one of the curtains aside a little and peeked through the window into the street below. We were on a main drag. It was still raining. I was

wishing it would stop because I was beginning to get an idea.

By eight o'clock that night, the smoke in the apartment and the stink of perspiration had become so strong that it was almost impossible to bear. I got onto Jake's ear and persuaded him to let me open the windows in the front room about an inch from the top and bottom to let some air in. He insisted that I keep the blinds down though. I looked out again and was glad to see that it had stopped raining.

I went into the bathroom, locked the door, and took out my reel of film. I shoved the tin container under the bathtub out of sight, and began looking at the film through the light. The negative was perfect.

Excitedly, I pulled the film through my fingers. I could see the entrance to the bank. Myself standing there—the boys entering—the clerk coming out—the shooting—the whole business. I told myself that the film was worth a fortune as a news reel! I rolled up the film again, stuck it in my pocket and returned to the front room. But before I sat down this time, I turned my chair sideways and shoved it up against the window.

Then I sat down and with my left hand I surreptitiously began to feed the film in my left hand coat pocket out the window.

WHEN I came to the end of the reel, I just hung onto it and began to wait for a bite like a patient fisherman. The poker game was still going strong. Every once in a while somebody would make a wise crack at me, and once Hammy asked me to go out in the kitchen for a bottle of soda. That scared me. I didn't want to let go of that film for even a second. I finally ducked it, and Hammy went himself.

I don't know how much time elapsed before I finally got my bite. But let me tell you, no angler—Izaak Walton, himself—ever got the thrill

out of a tug on the end of his line that I got when I felt that film go taut in my hand. I damned near shouted out loud. For a minute I was so panicky I couldn't think what to do. Then I gave the film a little jerk. There was a moment's pause; then the jerk was returned. I let go.

I had a terrible desire, then, to fling up the window, stick my head out, and find out who had grabbed the film. Would he hold it to the light and see what it was? If he did, would he recognize it as the celebrated bank robbery that had been in the papers for the last two days? Would he know enough to go to the police with it? Would he remember what apartment window it had been hanging from?

I almost went nuts asking myself these questions. I couldn't sit by the window any longer, so I got up and paced the room. This made the gang sore, so I grabbed myself a pint and began nursing it. I had to do something to keep from going crazy.

Time seemed like something gone dead. My nerves grew like tight hot wires inside of me. The poker game went on and on, the men completely oblivious to the suspense that gnawed at my insides. I think I was just about on the verge of some screwball move when the knock came on the door. Hard and sharp it was.

The room went suddenly quiet.

The expression on the faces of the men relaxed to a general deadpan stare. They gawked at each other like a lot of fishes. Jake growled in an undertone: "Who the hell is that?"

Instantly there was a wild scrambling for guns. The card table collapsed, sending cards, bottles, glasses, ash trays crashing to the floor. Like cornered rats, a group of the men made a rush for the kitchen door. There was a fire escape in the back.

Some one in the hall outside began a series of driving crashes at the door. Hammy and another man grabbed Tommy-guns and sent withering waves of bullets splintering through it. Jake began screaming in-

structions in all directions. I heard the sickening sounds of breaking glass coming from the kitchen.

Just about then I decided I ought to be doing something to distinguish myself from these crooks when the cops came in. Otherwise they'd blast me off the map with the rest of them. I made a leap at Jake Kroll. He was the nearest to me. We grappled.

Hammy wheeled upon us. "That's the stinking stool pigeon that's responsible!" he snarled. "I know it—Jake—those films—"

He swung his gun around, waist high. A spray of bullets whizzed past my ear. Kroll attempted to conk me with the butt of his Luger pistol. He was cursing like a madman. I got one arm around his neck, strained, and the two of us reeled dizzily to the floor. He landed on top, and his weight sent the breath out of my body in one convulsive blast.

Then more bodies began to pile up on top of us. Just before I passed out, I heard Hammy shrieking about trying to get a bead on me. Just after that, I guess, the room became full of cops. . . .

That's the whole story. I'm glad Shorty's widow is being taken care of with the news reel proceeds of that film. I knew those pictures would be worth plenty. They were worth a lot to me—proved I didn't fire a single shot during the holdup.

Besides that, they were the means of my meeting Gloria—er—Miss Hodge, here. It was funny. When I woke up in the hospital they told me about this gal that grabbed the film and took it to the cops. They asked me if I'd like to meet her. She came to see how I was getting along. Of course I was crazy to see her. She'd saved my life. Imagine my surprise when she came in—young, beautiful, everything!

As for this reward money, well, I guess I can use it. In fact I *know* I can use it. There's an awful lot of swell places around this city to take a girl like Gloria!

Sharpshooter— Without Bullets

By Paul Adams

Author of "The Devil's Coronet," etc.



Captain Roger Norvale, big-game hunter, was a dead shot. But he was lured among the harmless, stuffed figures of his jungle trophies to face a stalking killer—without powder and bullets.

ROGER NORVALE experienced a strange feeling of disquietude as he stepped from the train. Even when stalking big game in the denseness of the tropical jungle, he had never been aware of the precise sensation of foreboding that now assailed him.

The train had hardly stopped to allow him to descend to the darkness of the deserted platform before the conductor waved his lantern. It pulled out of the station, leaving him in solitude.

Valley Junction was one of those stations that are marked with an asterisk in the time tables; a footnote explaining the asterisk to the effect that: "Train stops to discharge passengers only."

Uncultivated land, thickly overgrown with rank grass, stretched on both sides. To the west a dirt road led along an upward slope of the terrain to the low hill upon which sat the estate of Donald Weston.

Norvale, in the infrequent periods

when he visited civilization, never failed to wonder that the wealthy Weston should have chosen such a gloomy spot to erect his costly home. He now perceived a pair of bright headlights approaching along the road from the hill. They almost blinded him, then were dimmed. The car swung in alongside the platform, and stopped.

Norvale picked up his small bag and got in. Rex Parker, Weston's secretary, was the driver. He was thirty-odd, with a weak chin and shifty eyes. He turned the car and headed back up the hill, saying, "How do, Captain Norvale? Glad to see you again. Your skins arrived yesterday."

Norvale had always disliked Parker instinctively. But he was courteous to him because he felt that he was also, in a sense, an employee of Weston's.

He said: "Yes, I sent them ahead from the boat. I was anxious to get the panther skin here as quickly as possible. We had run short of preservative when we killed the panther, and I had to let the natives cure it with wood ashes. They didn't do such a good job, and I was afraid it wouldn't last till Doctor Loring could get to work on it. Do you know if he's mounted it yet?"

Parker seemed preoccupied with the task of guiding the car up the hill. "Why—yes. I think he mounted it today. I—we've—been having other troubles, captain. Though Mr. Weston doesn't seem to be bothered much by them. He was all excited about the skins—says he doesn't regret a single dollar he's spent to finance your expeditions."

Norvale glanced sideways at the secretary. Again the night, for some unaccountable reason, seemed to exercise an uncanny spell of depression upon him. "You say—you've been having trouble?"

Parker laughed nervously. "I guess you can call it that. We may all be out of jobs. Weston made all his money in a bear market, you know,

and he's never been cured of selling short. Well, he sold short once too often. He was caught flat when the market jumped. He's cleaned out—five millions, gone over night!"

"Tough luck," said Norvale. To him the loss of money did not appear as a calamity. He had lived for months at a stretch in places where money was no good.

Parker said gloomily: "This is a rotten time to be out of a job."

Norvale restrained an expression of contempt. Parker had been with Weston for several years. Now he had no thought of sympathy for his employer—only worry about his job.

Norvale said aloud: "I don't suppose Weston's down and out. His private collection up there is worth a million dollars if it's worth a cent. Some of the specimens I've sent him are considered very valuable. And Doctor Loring has prepared them so skillfully that any museum would be glad to have them. In my opinion, Loring is the best taxidermist in America."

Parker was silent. He drove slowly, as if he were trying to kill time. Suddenly he asked, "Did you bring a gun along, captain?"

"Of course not," Norvale said, surprised. "Why do you ask that?"

"Well—there's something else—more trouble. It looks bad. And Mr. Weston is so wrapped up in his specimens, he refuses to get excited about it."

"What is it, man?" Norvale demanded impatiently.

Parker hesitated, then said: "You remember Brenda Ewing?"

"Weston's ward? Sure I do. She's been living here with him since her parents died. They were distant cousins of Weston's, if I recall right. Sure I remember her. Last time I saw her she was a kid. Brown hair, big eyes—"

"She's not a kid any more. She was to celebrate her twenty-first birthday in a couple of weeks."

"Was?"

TSD

Parker nodded, staring straight ahead. "Was. I'm afraid she won't, though. She's been carried off. Last night she went to bed as usual. About two hours later, her maid was passing in the corridor and heard a sort of muffled cry. Before she had a chance to do anything, the door of Brenda's room was flung open and a man with a handkerchief over his face came tearing out. He was carrying Brenda over his shoulder. Before the maid could cry out, the man struck her in the face and knocked her out. When she came to, the man had disappeared with Brenda."

Norvale whistled. "No trace of her in the countryside?"

Parker grinned sourly. They were coming through the massive gate of the estate. The gate had been opened for them by a man who stood on guard.

"There's no sense in searching the countryside," Parker stated. "Brenda's somewhere inside the walls. The man could never have got her out. There are a dozen guards on the grounds, besides the dogs at night. And there's a wire running around along the entire circumference of the wall; from dusk to dawn it carries enough electricity to kill a man. It was put up for the protection of the museum specimens. No, she's in here, and so is her abductor. But the grounds have been turned upside down without finding her!"

"Well," said Norvale, "it looks as if I should have brought my gun!"

THEY passed several other guards between the gate and the house. Parker, leaving the car in the driveway, conducted Norvale inside, past the single officer left on guard by the state troopers.

Donald Weston was in the combination study and library on the ground floor. It was here that the millionaire spent most of his leisure, poring over ornithological tomes. He was a short, thin man of fifty who looked more like

a bookworm than like the reckless market plunger the world knew him to be. His recent tremendous loss in the market did not seem to have affected him particularly. He was the kind of man, Norvale thought, who could be as careless of other people's lives and money as of his own. The abduction of his ward, Brenda Ewing, might not mean as much to him as the loss of one of the precious skins in his private collection.

He greeted Norvale warmly, motioned to Parker to leave them alone.

Parker asked: "Any word of Miss Ewing, Mr. Weston?"

"No," said Weston shortly.

Parker said: "I'll have your bag taken up to the same room you had last time, Captain Norvale."

When he left them, Weston swung around to Norvale. "Look here, Roger. I'm more worried about this business of Brenda than I appear to be. I don't know whom to trust." He took off his glasses, waved them in the air. "Every inch of the estate has been searched." He thrust out his hands appealingly. "Help me, Roger, won't you?"

"Of course," said Norvale. "But don't expect much of me. I'm not a trained detective." He thrust his hands in his pockets, began to pace slowly up and down. "What about Parker? Can you trust him?"

"Certainly. The police questioned him. But I'll swear he had nothing to do with it. He's in love with Brenda—was hoping to marry her."

Norvale's nose twitched disgustedly. "How did Brenda feel about that?"

"I can't say she was enthusiastic. I don't think she—ah—encouraged his suit."

"Good for Brenda," Norvale laughed. "I see she has grown up to be a young lady of discrimination." Suddenly a thought occurred to him. "Why was Parker so eager to marry her—outside of being in love? Has Brenda got money in her own right?"

Weston nodded. "Brenda inherits the bulk of her mother's estate in two

weeks, upon reaching her twenty-first birthday; that is, with the exception of minor bequests which have long ago been paid to relatives in Australia." His eyes became filmed with moisture, and he hastily donned his spectacles to hide the sign of emotion. "You've got to help me find her, Roger. I brought that girl up from childhood. I have been more than the executor of her estate. I have felt—like a father to her!"

Norvale crossed over to the other, put a consoling hand on his shoulder. "We'll find her. Suppose we take a look around."

Weston nodded. "We'll stop in and see how Doctor Loring is getting on with your skins. Then you can wash up and I'll show you Brenda's room and let you talk to the maid."

Weston's private collection of mammals was in a wing at the west side of the house. The door was locked. Weston rapped, and frowned when there was no answer. "Strange," he said. "I've never known Loring to lock himself in."

"Can we get in any other way?" Norvale asked.

"Yes. This is Loring's workroom. There's another door through the museum proper."

HE led the way around a bend in the corridor, and into a large, high-ceilinged room. This room had been built into the house, the two upper floors being torn away, so that the room extended up to the roof. It was the contents of this room that had been valued by Norvale at a million dollars. It contained specimens of almost every mammal known to man, and they had been mounted and arranged in expert manner by Doctor Loring.

"I suppose Parker mentioned to you about my—er—losses?"

"He did," Norvale said.

"Well," defiantly, "I may be broke, but I'll never sell this collection."

They crossed the exhibition room,

passing groups of animals arranged in lifelike pose. They represented the consummate skill of Loring, the taxidermist. There was one group of blacktailed deer in the center. They were placed in a setting of imitation rock and foliage, and seemed to be in the very act of grazing. Behind them was a long and vicious-looking panther, crouching to spring upon them.

"That's Loring's masterpiece," Weston said enthusiastically. "The panther is one of the skins that arrived yesterday. He mounted it first. It completes that group perfectly."

"I had a close call with that cat," Norvale told the older man. "He almost got me."

There was a door at the other end of the room. "That's the other entrance to Loring's workroom," Weston explained.

The door was unlocked. Weston pushed in first. The place was in darkness. Weston felt for the switch along the wall and clicked it. The light revealed a compact little room. Every inch of space had been utilized. There were racks on which skins were being stretched. There were frameworks on which clay models were being built up. When the skins were ready, they would be sewed on to these clay models.

And on the floor in the center of the room lay the body of Doctor Loring! He had been stabbed through the eye with a long glover's needle—one of the implements used in sewing the skins—and it had pierced his brain.

Weston recoiled from the body, his face draining of color.

Norvale controlled himself with an effort. He had known Loring for years. He knelt beside the body and assured himself that Loring was beyond aid.

"Good God," Weston said hoarsely, "there's a murderer somewhere in the house. And yet it seems impossible with all the protection I've got." He glanced fearfully over his shoulder into the museum room and shuddered.

"For all we know, the murderer may be hiding out there."

The indirect lighting in the museum left many corners in darkness. The figures of the mounted animals threw weird shadows.

Norvale said, "You better tell the trooper outside, Mr. Weston, so he can notify his headquarters."

Weston nodded. "I'll do that right away."

"I'll look around here in the meantime," Norvale told him.

Weston went out, peering nervously into the shadows around him.

Norvale stooped once more to the body of Doctor Loring. The taxidermist's face betrayed no fear or surprise. It was settled calmly in death. The body had become rigid already. There was a lump at the back of his head. He had been hit first, probably knocked unconscious, and then deliberately stabbed with the needle.

Norvale examined the rest of the room, finding nothing of significance. He went out into the museum and walked from one end to the other, searching out all the dark shadows. He climbed into the enclosure in which the panther was crouching to spring upon the black-tailed deer, and examined carefully the mounted jungle cat which he had caught on his last trip.

Loring had done a sloppy piece of work there. The cast had not been properly made, the completed specimen had not been well posed. The skin had been stretched hastily, and the head was askew.

IT was not like Loring to work so carelessly. He must have been under some strain, or else in a great hurry. Had he known something of Brenda Ewing's disappearance, and been in fear of being killed for his knowledge?

Norvale looked at his wrist watch and frowned. Weston should have been back by this time. Casting a last glance at the body of Loring, visible

through the doorway of the smaller room, he went out into the corridor. He came around the bend into the main hall and heard voices raised in heated anger. Near the front door stood Parker wearing his hat and coat, with two bags on the floor beside him. The state trooper was standing silently just inside the door, while Weston, red in the face shouted at the secretary.

"You'll not leave this house, Parker, till the police talk to you again. I don't care how you feel about it—you stay right here!"

Parker towered over his little employer. His voice drowned Weston's. "I tell you I had nothing to do with Brenda's disappearance. You know damn well I wouldn't hurt her." His eyes blazed with sudden hate. "Why are you down on me all of a sudden—because I'm quitting? I'm not a slave. You don't own me!"

They saw Norvale and stopped.

Norvale came up to them, said to the secretary: "You leaving, Parker?"

"Damn right, I am. There's nothing for me here. My job'll be gone here, and I have to look out for myself. I don't owe Weston a thing; I worked hard for my pay!"

Norvale turned to Weston. "Have you told him about Loring?"

"I didn't get a chance to," Weston said. "I came out here and saw him leaving. My first thought was to stop him."

The state trooper shifted his bulk a little and displayed interest.

Parker asked sulkily: "What about Loring?"

"Doctor Loring," said Norvale quietly, "has been murdered."

The trooper stiffened to attention, frowned at Parker, and put a hand on his shoulder. "And you were scrambling, huh?"

Parker's face became a pasty white. He wet his lips with his tongue and exclaimed, "I swear to you—I'm not the one that stabbed him!"

Norvale smiled grimly. "I didn't say

he'd been stabbed. How did you know?"

Parker seemed to have realized his mistake even as he spoke. He bit his lip now, said desperately: "I looked in to tell Doctor Loring that you were here. I saw his body. Good God, Norvale, I didn't do it. I just found him that way. I—I didn't want to be mixed up in the whole thing any more, so I packed my bags."

The trooper's hand clamped tighter on his shoulder. "So you figured you'd walk out, huh? I guess you better stick around awhile." He shook the pale secretary and looked at Weston. "Will you phone headquarters, sir? I'll take this bird up to his room and look through his bags. Might find a clue to Miss Brenda's disappearance."

Weston nodded, seeming too stunned to speak.

The trooper drew his gun, motioned to Parker. "Get upstairs, you!"

Parker said nothing. He glared at Weston and Norvale, picked up his bags and went up the stairs, followed by the trooper.

Weston looked pale and drawn. Deep shadows lay under his eyes. "God!" he exclaimed. "I can't believe it's possible—that Parker should be capable of murder!"

"Did he and Loring ever have any trouble?" Norvale asked.

"None that I know of. They seemed to get along all right." Weston was suddenly struck by a thought. He clutched Norvale's sleeve. "Brenda! If he's killed Loring, he must have killed Brenda too. Where do you think he's hidden her?"

Norvale shook his head. "I'm not a detective. Let's leave it to the police."

Weston said wearily: "Well, I guess that's about all we can do. I think I'll lie down on the couch in the study after I phone. It'll take them a little while. Milford, the county seat, is eighteen miles from here. You going to wash up?"

"Not yet. I want to look in the museum again. There's something—"

Norvale stopped in mid-sentence as there came from above the sudden slamming of a door and the sound of the trooper's voice raised in an angry shout: "Open that door, damn it!" Then the sound of something battering against wood to the accompaniment of curses.

NORVALE lunged up the stairs followed by Weston. In the upper hall they saw the trooper banging away at the closed door of one of the rooms with the butt of his gun.

"What's happened?" Weston shouted.

The trooper turned an apoplectic face to them. "We were steppin' into his room. Parker went in first. It was dark, an' he just slammed the door in my face!"

"Let's break it down," said Norvale.

"Shoot the lock out!" Weston shouted. "Before he gets out the window!"

The officer nodded. He placed the muzzle of his gun close to the lock and fired. Then he shoved against the door, and it swung open.

The room was in darkness.

The trooper shouted: "Come out!"

There was no answer.

Norvale slid past the uniformed man into the room, felt along the wall for a light switch, found it and clicked it on.

The room was empty. The window was open.

The trooper leaped to the window and fired in the air. Shadowy figures ran across the grounds toward the house. They were the guards who had been scattered about the place. Norvale recalled that Weston had always provided himself with plenty of protection.

Dogs barked in the darkness outside.

The trooper raised his voice above the noise of the dogs, calling to the men who ran towards them. "Look out for Parker. He's a murderer. He jumped out of this window. He must be outside!"

Somebody called up: "Okay, officer."

Half a dozen servants were peering into the room from the corridor, their faces frightened. Weston ordered them to go back to their rooms. "There may be shooting," he told them. "Parker has killed Doctor Loring and escaped. We fear he has also killed Miss Brenda. If any of you see him, give the alarm at once!"

The servants dispersed.

Norvale rapped out: "We've got to search the ground floor immediately. Parker may have doubled back into the house."

"That's a good idea," said the trooper.

Norvale led the way out. "You and Mr. Weston, take the front of the house. I'll take the museum. There's something I want to look at in there anyway."

Weston asked him: "Have you got a gun?"

Norvale remembered that Parker had asked him the same question. "No," he answered impatiently. "I didn't expect to walk into bloody murder when I came here!"

"Wait a minute," Weston said. "I'll get you one. I have a spare automatic in my room."

He went down the corridor, and the trooper started down the stairs.

Norvale was left alone for a moment. Once more he felt that queer feeling of disquietude. Somehow this house and the whole neighborhood seemed to carry an unsavory aroma.

Weston came back with two automatics. He gave one to Norvale.

"I don't need to tell you to be sure the safety is off before you shoot," he said with an attempt at lightness.

Norvale said nothing, led the way downstairs.

The state trooper was in the front of the hall. "Go along with him," Norvale told Weston.

"All right," the little ex-millionaire said. "I'll take this part of the house,

the officer can go through the east wing, and you can cover the west wing and the museum."

The trooper called back: "All the servants are upstairs. If you see anybody, shoot first and ask questions afterwards."

Norvale left them and made his way around the bend in the corridor to the door of the museum. He opened the door.

The interior of the museum was dark.

He remembered distinctly that he had left the light on. He felt along inside the doorway until he found the switch, and pushed.

THE mellow, indirect lighting illuminated the interior, casting deep shadows in many corners. From outside, through an open window, came the hoarse shouts of searching men, and the baying of the dogs.



Norvale advanced into the room, leaving the door open behind him. He held the gun ready.

And then he stopped, eyes narrowed. The door of Doctor Loring's workroom was open, but the little room itself, where lay the doctor's body, had no light. Norvale had left the light on.

He crossed the museum floor, past the mounted group of grazing black-

tailed deer and stalking panther, and stopped just outside the workroom. He could hear no sound now, but he knew somehow that a living person was in there with the corpse.

Swiftly he stepped into the little room, and crouched. From his left there was a sudden, quick flurry, and a dark shape slammed into him. Two hands were clamped about his throat, the fingers contracting mercilessly.

Norvale swung the automatic in a wide, vicious arc, and brought it down on his attacker's head. There was a gasp, the fingers opened spasmodically, and the hands fell away from his throat. A body slumped to the floor.

Norvale stood up, found the switch, and turned on the light. Parker lay on the floor, unconscious. The blood was coming freely from a nasty cut in the top of his head. Evidently he had doubled back into the museum realizing the futility of escape from the guarded grounds.

Norvale let him lie there, stepped purposefully past the body of Doctor Loring, and picked up from the work bench a sharp-edged skinning knife.

He went out into the museum, climbed into the enclosure where the panther was stalking the deer.

He turned the mounted cat over on its back, and slit the skin along the seam where it had been sewed, from the edge of the lower lip to the tip of the tail.

His eyes gleamed as he uncovered the plaster mould under the skin. With the edge of the knife he chipped at the plaster till chunks of it fell away. What he saw underneath caused him to work frantically till he had gotten most of the plaster off.

When he finished, his eyes were bleak.

For the plaster had covered the dead body of Brenda Ewing!

And suddenly, the outside door of the museum room slammed shut, and the lights went out.

He whirled, saw nothing in the darkness.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see into the workroom, which was still lit. The body of Doctor Loring still lay in the center, and Parker was huddled near the doorway, stirring feebly.

Norvale picked up his gun, which he had laid on the floor beside him.

Some one was in the museum, moving quietly—someone who had put out the light. Why?

Norvale started to move away from beside the body of Brenda Ewing.

But a flashlight clicked on, bathing him in light. It came from close by him. Whoever was in the room had crept up.

Norvale leaped aside, and at the same time fired at the flashlight. An involuntary oath escaped him. He was a dead shot, and should have put that light out.

But the gun was loaded with blanks.

There was a chuckle from the one who held the flashlight. Norvale stopped alongside one of the black-tailed deer. There was no use dodging, the light was following his every move.

There was a click—the sound of a safety catch being shoved down on an automatic.

Norvale said: "Weston?"

There was another chuckle. "How did you guess?"

Norvale was sparring for time. "I didn't—until I tried to shoot this automatic."

"But you came back here to open up the panther?"

"I knew that Loring couldn't have done such a poor job. It had to be either you or Parker. And I recalled that you had often helped Loring."

"I am sorry," Weston said silkily, "that my skill at taxidermy wasn't greater. It might not have been necessary, then, to kill you."

Norvale exclaimed accusingly, "You killed Brenda Ewing—your own ward—so you could remain in control of her estate until it's settled."

You were going to use her money to play the market again. And you killed Loring because he found out!"

Weston's voice carried a tinge of self-satisfaction. "You are very astute for a young man who has lived in the jungle most of his life. You see, I could never bear to have all these specimens sold at auction. What is a silly girl's life compared to these treasures?"

Norvale said tensely, "Hell, I wish I were back in the jungle, where things are clean!" He saw Weston move forward slightly, and he spoke quickly, preparing, meanwhile, to leap at Weston and die fighting: "And now you plan to kill me, too, and blame it all on Parker. He certainly played into your hands by getting panicky when he saw Loring's body. They'll never suspect you now."

NORVALE clamped his jaws shut. He ducked behind the mounted deer. Weston's gun barked, and a bullet smashed into the stuffed animal. Two more followed it.

But Norvale had gotten out of the glare of the flashlight. He swung behind a second deer. With the glare out of his eyes, he could discern Weston's figure. He stood up and hurled his gun just as Weston fired a fourth

time. He felt a tugging at his side, then a burning pain. But he saw Weston stagger. He had hit Weston squarely on the face with the gun.

He gave the millionaire no time to recover, but lunged out at him.

Weston fired blindly. The bullet went wild. Norvale had forgotten the low rope around the enclosure. He tripped over it just as Weston's finger, clamped tightly on the gun, sent two more slugs past his head.

Norvale landed outside the enclosure on his hands and knees and lunged out in a flying tackle that caught Weston above the knees and floored him.

Weston clubbed his gun and struck at Norvale's head, but Norvale brought his fist down in a powerful swing. It caught Weston on the side of the head, and he sucked in his breath sharply and slumped down, dropping the flashlight.

There was a tumult and a shouting in the corridor, and a dozen men broke into the room, headed by the state trooper. Some one put on the lights.

The trooper shouted: "What've you done to Mr. Weston?"

Norvale stood up unsteadily. He felt his side and brought his hand away bloody.

"Nothing much," he said.



Dead Man's Martyrdom

By Leon Dupont

The avaricious scientist made one mistake in his shrewd murder scheme — he tried to kill a dead man.

NEXT to life itself there was only one thing Dr. Albert Klausman wanted. That was fame. Ambition, the glory of achievement, flooded his soul like a great rolling wave. And nothing, Dr. Klausman vowed, nothing would be allowed to block his march to this noble goal.

Gazing fixedly through his eight-inch spectacles, Dr. Klausman knew he was upon the threshold of fame — everlasting fame in which he could bask satisfied the rest of his life, a steadfast beacon star to his fellow practitioners. And, just as mighty as he felt himself, so he felt all other lives were insignificant, merely sacks of dross and brittle bones.

Not through his prismatic lenses but in the eye of his imagination, he visioned one of these unimportant beings now. Contrasted with the doctor's gross lumpishness, the other was puny, scrawny. Bent over a fuming beaker in a laboratory, he coughed at every few breaths, momentarily turning away to suck in a few mouthfuls of slightly purer air. His straw-colored hair hung low over his eyes like a poodle's, eyes dull but only latently so. A quickly darting tongue ran over dry lips as he lifted the beaker in fingers so tense it

seemed the glass would be crushed to many innumerable bits.

The image was not pleasant to Dr. Albert Klausman but it was accurate, that of a man whose nerves had been torn to shreds and were now at the breaking point. This man was Isaac Volner, his laboratory assistant, one of the best research men in the field of preventive medicine but—and this

brought a smile to the doctor's smug lips—one of the least known. His loss to science would be only potential, and loss there would be. For Isaac Volner stood in Dr. Albert Klausman's path to fame.

The doctor shook the vision from his brain, and as though to prevent its return, ground out

his Turkish cigarette vigorously. For fourteen months he had awaited the time when he could announce to the medical world the results of his experiments. For fourteen months he had whetted the appetites of scientists, throwing them vague hints and vaguer answers to their questions. Now he was ready to announce his findings.

Now? Not yet. There was Isaac Volner to deal with first. To his inner self Dr. Klausman admitted the discovery was less his own and more



his assistant's. But Volner had become unreasonable and claimed all the credit. If he acknowledged this, Dr. Klausman would be left with only a crumb of fame which meant defeat to his desires. To deny the claim would mean a shadow cast upon his laurels. There was only one way to answer Isaac Volner. He must go, his whinings smothered in death.

Lolling back in his luxurious easy chair, the doctor lapsed into the imaginary again. Upon the ceiling he saw great audiences clamoring for light, piles of telegrams, of press notices, volumes of scientific works. All these and infinitely more would be his reward—beginning tomorrow.

Tomorrow he would sit down at his desk and very calmly and deliberately write a letter to the president of the American Academy. That letter would be a bulletin to the world at large that there had been brought to recognition a new vitamin, the anti-scrofula vitamin—Vitamin K, the Klausman Vitamin.

Rigid with the magnitude of the thought, Dr. Albert Klausman relaxed only after long minutes, and then he found his squat, heavy frame trembling a little. Rousing himself and moving to the window he watched the throngs far below him. Antlike they seemed, miserable, non-entities milling about blindly. The thought sent new blood coursing through the doctor's veins. He, from this pinnacle of near-fame, knew perfectly his own destination. And this was precisely as it should be.

Abruptly he turned away from the window and filled a hypodermic syringe with a fluid from a small bottle in his medicine cabinet. The instrument concealed in his pocket, he proceeded down the corridor of the building, round, ponderous head sunk low between his shoulders, turning neither to right nor left, stocky legs bringing him up before an unmarked door in another wing. With a pink, well-boiled hand he extracted a key and turned the lock.

ISAAC VOLNER faced him. A penned-up hyena, worn fleshless trying to escape, could not have appeared more eager to leap at the throat of his guard. Under the mercury lamp his pale face was an ashy green, its furrows deep shadows converging at the inverted curve of his mouth. And his eyes burned with a quickened heat.

"Well, Isaac, dear fellow," the doctor greeted fatuously, "your work is almost over."

"No." The puckered lips of the other moved imperceptibly, his hands twitching at the test tube in his thin fingers. "No—my work has just begun. I told you, Dr. Klausman, that I alone am the discoverer of Vitamin K, and so I am going down in history. I begin now the task of making the name Volner unforgettable."

"Yes, I believe you did say something of the sort, Isaac." Dr. Klausman settled his bulk to a stool and gazed at the array of flasks and retorts, with scarcely a glance at the assistant. "But of course you realize what you say is drivel, only the warped notions of a confined brain. You—an obscure laboratory man, making such a prodigious announcement, would be laughed out of hearing. And besides, it is not true. I am the discoverer of Vitamin K, having furnished all the funds for the experiments, and being well known and the expected source of such a revelation, I expect to name it the Klausman Vitamin."

A surge of emotion cost the assistant's lungs bitter convulsion as he attempted to reply. Controlling himself, he spoke with measured care:

"It is not my brain that is warped, doctor, but your own. And your heart is corroded. Last year I came to you with the idea that the anti-scrofula vitamin could be traced. You accepted my proposition to let me experiment, you to pay the expense, both of us to share the victory. I have done all the work, shut up in this airless prison, breathing this gas until my lungs are

as rotten as wet tissue paper. Then—"Volner crushed the test tube in his fingers, eyes gleaming from the depths of their dark sockets "—I find the vitamin! And you think you will name it—steal it."

Dr. Klausman smiled generously, unmoved, albeit he squeezed the barrel of the hypodermic syringe in his pocket. "My dear Isaac—your nerves. Go home and rest until you know what you are saying."

"I know now, doctor. I know you—a pig, a fat, gluttonous pig—a pig for the spotlight. You do not care how much disease my vitamin eliminates. You only want to strut here and there like some god, bestowing alms on the rest of the doctors. But you shall not do this."

The gaseous air pinched Dr. Klausman's lungs as it sent his assistant into another spasm. He saturated his handkerchief with water and held it to his mouth and nose. Volner subsided presently, his voice under control, but the words still acrid.

"Go back to your office, Dr. Klausman. I'm nauseated easily now. And I'm afraid this chlorinate will eat your tissues away as it has mine. Thank goodness it has not eaten my brain. Go back to your nice sterilized office—with this to remember: you are going to be cheated out of your stolen glory—this in spite of the fact that you have every advantage. You can not see how I could possibly get any of the credit due me, yet I will, doctor. I have a plan you would never perceive—you are not big enough to understand it. But very soon you will find I have taken for my own the Volner Vitamin."

The heavy features of the medical man melted into a patronizing smile. In indecision he touched the hypodermic again and then drew out his pinkish hand without the instrument. He had just thought of a much wiser course. Without retaliation he nodded his way graciously to the door and locked it behind him trudging back down the corridor.

IN the privacy of his own office he replaced the syringe and took down instead the sausage-shaped tank of chlorinated gas, the same gas which Isaac Volner had been breathing for months in the laboratory with such disastrous results to his body. It hissed out ominously as the doctor tested the little valve. Harmless to a normal system perhaps, he thought, but to Volner's this amount forced into his lungs would unquestionably be fatal. And who would ever guess that death had been due to other than the natural causes of slow asphyxiation?

The telephone bell jangled raucously, and clearing his throat to moisten it and bring himself back to common things, the doctor lifted the hook. The voice was sharply questioning.

"Dr. Albert Klausman? This is the *News*. Do you employ a laboratory man by the name of Isaac Volner? That's all, doctor—thanks. Just checking up."

As abruptly as the voice had left, Dr. Klausman turned again to the corridor door and then hesitated, puzzled. It occurred to him that the newspaper query was very odd. Perhaps Volner with his childishly gullible mind, had given the story of the new vitamin to the *News*—this way to win eternal glory for himself, a plan so big apparently that no one could understand it. At once, the newspaper had doubted, as would every one else. No one would believe the truth coming from such an unknown. The Volner Vitamin—Dr. Klausman sighed sardonically and tightened his fingers around the steel tube of gas.

At the door of the laboratory he thought he detected dull moans from within, and he flicked the key quickly. Open-mouthed, he saw writhing on the floor the constricted body of his assistant. Without delaying to wonder, instantly fixing the answer as an acute lung attack due to the action of the gas in the room, he swooped down beside the man. With all its intense

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 106)

evidence of pain, Isaac Volner's face was set in a mirthless grin and he screamed between choking gasps, "The Volner Vitamin—he will—not—get—it. . . ."

Swiftly, with a medical man's dexterity, Dr. Klausman inserted the tip of the valve in the agonized man's nostrils and touched the screw. He did not turn it, however, for the broken words had ceased altogether and the body doubled up in another violent cramping of muscles. Then slowly it relaxed and breathing grew less labored, then stopped entirely. The doctor snatched ironically at the passing thought that the man had died without his own conscience suffering possible strain. He started. Men were forcing into the room.

"That's him—Dr. Klausman. I've seen him before. Is this a story! How are you, doctor? What are you doing there?"

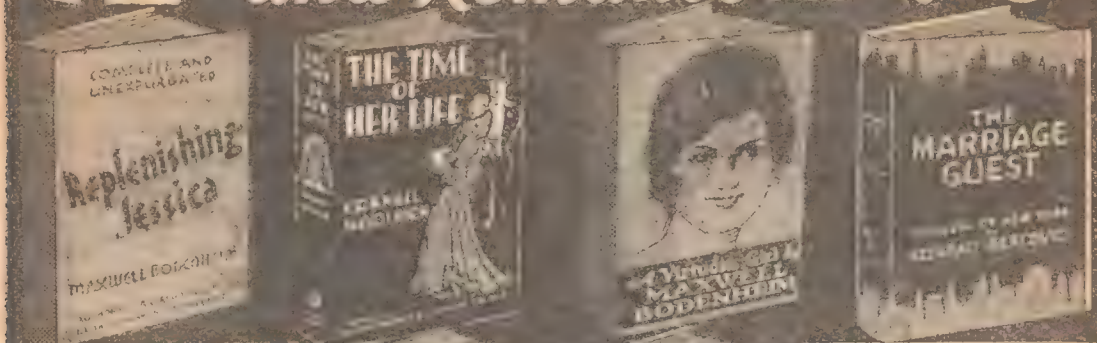
Striving for recovery, Dr. Klausman appeared coldly challenging to the uninvited four—the speaker, small and beak-nosed, a second man whom he recognized as a doctor accompanied by a hospital interne and an inscrutable man in a dark-blue suit.

"I'm afraid I don't know you gentlemen," he said quietly, holding up the steel cylinder, "but this happens to be an emergency tank of oxygen. I have been trying to revive this poor devil, but I got here too late. He is my assistant, Isaac Volner—poisoned by the gas he has been breathing in this stuffy place so long. I came here from my office a minute ago and found him writhing on the floor. What do you want?"

THE bumptious little man straightened from the body where the physician and interne were making an examination. "I want the rest of the story, doctor. Volner phoned the paper fifteen minutes ago. He said he was positive you intended to kill him today—had been afraid of it for some

(Continued on page 110)

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(Continued from page 108)

time. He sounded a little cracked, but I figured it was worth checking up. I called the sergeant here and he brought along a doctor and the ambulance."

"And I want that jigger you've got there," announced the detective, removing the cylinder of gas from the unresisting hands of Dr. Klausman. "This reporter says he thinks there's trouble up here and I see he's right. The trouble is murder, doc. This don't look like no oxygen tank to me." He turned the valve screw and sniffed, jerking his head up quickly. "Whew—oxygen, my eye! Boys, it ain't often I get a setup like this with the murderer and three witnesses."

Dr. Albert Klausman waved his hands in mock helplessness. Actually he was not stricken with misgivings. The situation was uncomfortable but not altogether unfortunate. Volner was dead, eliminated. He, himself, seemed to be incriminated at the moment, but he had been able to slip out from other entanglements before and he would again. The attention the case would attract would be very desirable, and when he was proven innocent, the public would give him even greater acclaim as the discoverer of Vitamin K.

"The situation is rather awkward," he said mildly, turning toward the reporter. "Look here, young man—you've been too hasty. It is no secret that Isaac Volner was losing his mind, the same as his lungs and heart. Yet on the word of such a man, you start a disturbance like this."

"Well, doc, your rep isn't any too good around town, you know." The reporter grinned. "So anything's possible, I figure. And this Volner told me a lot more over the phone—how you were pulling a dirty deal on him, taking full credit for a new vitamin he had discovered. Volner knew he was going to die and he told me I'd find a copy of the arrangement he made with you and the complete rec-

(Continued on page 112)

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(Continued from page 110)

ord of the experiments in one of the drawers in this lab. I've got a re-write man working on the story right now and if I find these papers and they check up all right, the stuff's off for you, doc. The AP will have that yarn in the morning papers all over the world." Peering and poking in the drawers of a cabinet against the outer wall, he triumphantly held up a type-written manuscript. "Got it! You're sunk, Dr. Klausman."

"Yeah," broke in the detective, "he slipped up there. He should have burned up that paper before he snuffed this Volner out.

The police physician looked up from the body of the assistant. "Something funny here, Burke. This man was poisoned with cyanide. Look at the spot on his lips."

"Poison?" echoed the sergeant.

"Wait a minute, you birds." The reporter swayed dramatically on his heels, fanning himself with the manuscript. "Give me a chance to explain. I told you, sarge, I thought there was trouble up here, but I didn't say what because I didn't want the other news hawks to get the story. Volner took that cyanide himself—he told me so on the phone. Know what martyrs are? Guys that die for science and things. It's usually a sure shot to fame. Isaac Volner made himself a martyr so the whole world would know the facts about Dr. Klausman and so the Vitamin K would be known as the Volner Vitamin instead of the Klausman Vitamin. It was the only way out he could see."

Simultaneous with a flutter of his heart, Dr. Klausman felt all the glory and exaltation of his pseudo-achievement fall away from him. The detective sergeant was snorting:

"Well, tie that to a mule! All over something to eat—vitamins. Volner poisoned himself! Well—never mind, doc, if they don't name a vitamin after you. Tryin' to kill a dead man will get you a lot of publicity. Maybe they'll name that the Klausman system."

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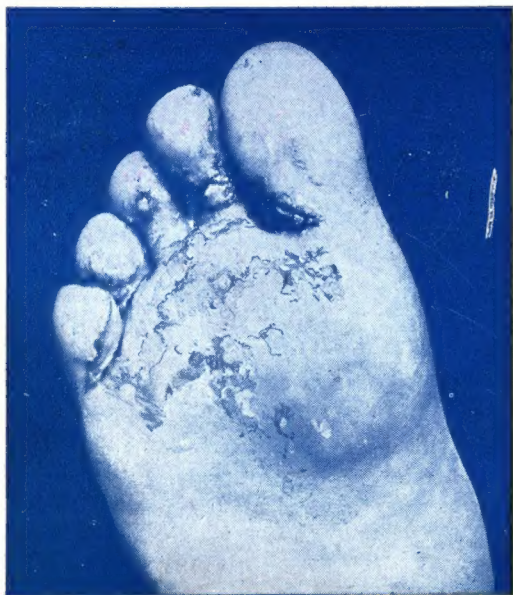
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FOOT ITCH

ATHLETE'S FOOT

*Send Coupon
Don't Pay Until Relieved*

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

HERE'S HOW TO TREAT IT

The germ that causes the disease is known as *Tinea Trichophyton*. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to kill the germ; so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the tissue of the skin where the germ breeds.

ITCHING STOPS IMMEDIATELY

As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or in mild cases less time.

H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us \$1 for the treatment at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.



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ACE

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